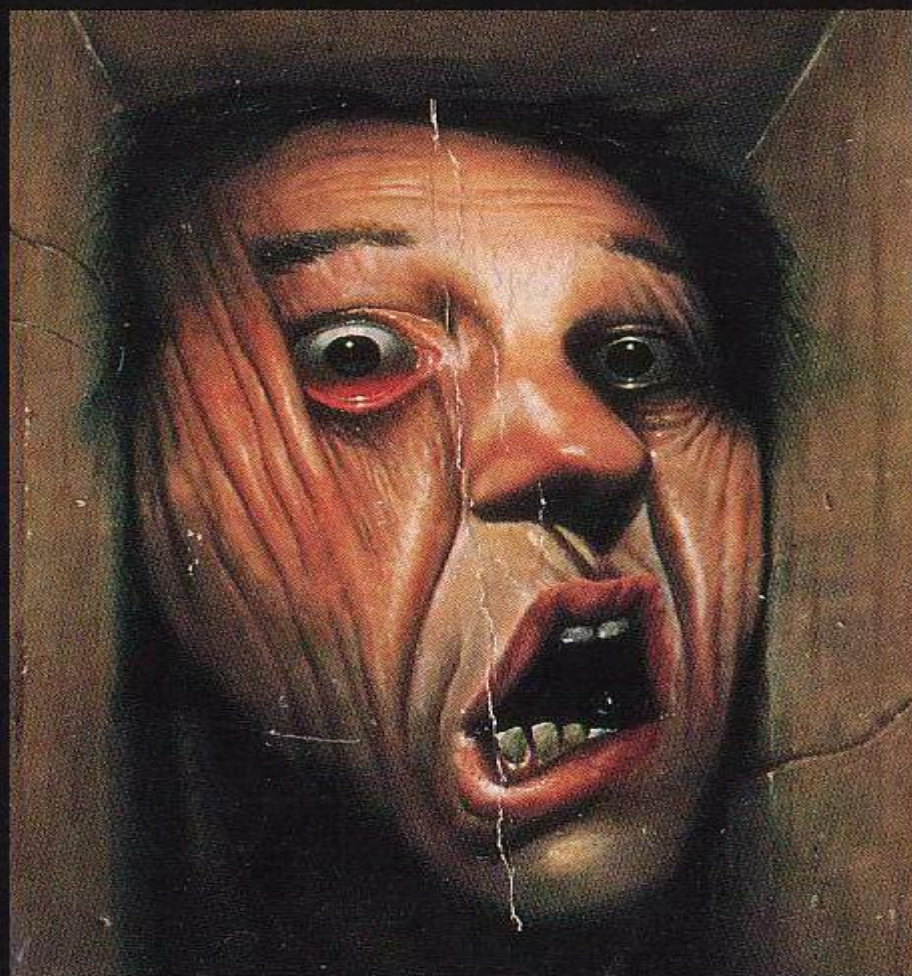


THE
YEAR'S BEST
HORROR
STORIES XVIII



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DAW
No. 834

Edited by
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Welcome To The Frightmare Lands...

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Trick or treat suddenly takes on a whole new meaning for one doctor who has long been exercising his powers over life and death....

When two boys' existences and identities somehow become intertwined, is one the dreamer and the other a dream?

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THE YEAR'S BEST HORROR STORIES: XVIII

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Introduction: Horror From Angst To Zombies - 7
Kaddish by Jack Dann - 10
The Gravedigger's Tale by Simon Clark - 21
Meeting The Author by Ramsey Campbell - 29
Buckets by F. Paul Wilson - 41
The Pit-Yakker by Brian Lumley - 59
Mr. Sandman by Scott D. Yost - 78
Renaissance by A. F. Kidd - 92
Lord Of Infinite Diversions by t. Winter-Damon - 110
Rail Rider by Wayne Alien Sallee - 112
Archway by Nicholas Royle - 116
The Confessional by Patrick McLeod - 132
The Deliverer by Simon MacCulloch - 145
Reflections by Jeffrey Goddin - 154
Zombies For Jesus by Nina Kiriki Hoffman - 170
The Earth Wire by Joel Lane - 177
Sponge And China Tea by D.F. Lewis - 188
The Boy With The Bloodstained Mouth by W.H. Pugmire - 192
On The Dark Road by Ian McDowell - 194
Narcopolis by Wayne Alien Sallee - 210
Nights In The City by Jessica Amanda Salmonson - 216
Return To The Mutant Rain Forest by Bruce Boston and Robert Frasier - 226
The End Of The Hunt by David Drake - 229
The Motivation by David Langford - 238
The Guide by Ramsey Campbell - 253
The Horse Of Iron & How We Can Know It & Be Changed By It Forever by M. John Harrison - 265
Jerry's Kids Meet Wormboy by David J. Schow - 279

Introduction: Horror From Angst To Zombies

Don't let anyone try to tell you that the horror boom is over.

A dozen years back when I started out as editor of *The Year's Best Horror Stories*, I used to reserve space on one shelf for genre publications with room for stories of note published outside the horror field. For 1989 hardcover and paperback anthologies alone crammed one long shelf, while small press magazines and booklets filled three Jack Daniels' cartons -- this in addition to the ordered rows of monthly magazines ostensibly devoted to science fiction. This reflects a yearly progression, and there's no sign of things leveling off. While one anthology series dies, another takes its place; when one magazine folds, two more take its place -- rather like the old story about the Hydra.

As a consequence, your overworked editor is being crowded out of his house by tottering stacks of horrors. And you, gentle reader, need only to settle down in your comfy chair and open your copy of *The Year's Best Horror Stories: XVIII* -- *this* tidy, compact volume of concentrated horror. Only your dauntless editor, who probably will have to trade in his mirror shades for bifocals, has chosen the best of the best for you from amongst the many hundreds of horror stories of 1989 -- painstakingly and painfully.

Don't think it's all been fun.

Increasingly in recent years as the genre has proliferated the criticism has been leveled that far, far too much current horror fiction is absolute rubbish. This, unfortunately, is all too true. Skipping over the dismal quality of most horror films and novels, the short story has also fallen victim to pure and simple bad writing. Plots, when present, are too often so obvious and trite that one can only wonder as to why the author is bothering to clone a cliché. Characterization is too often lacking, motivation absent, and writing skills laughable. One piece of evidence of this is the shrinking average word length of the horror story. This reflects a growing trend in horror writing simply to introduce a few faceless expendables and rush them to a grisly end -- the grislier the better. Your editor yawns and turns to the next and similar pointless exercise.

How then to explain the increasing popularity of horror fiction? It's a sad combination of diminished expectations on the part of the reader and of limited aspirations on the part of the writer. A readership grown up on a fast-food diet of stalk-and-slash splatter films expects the same brainless level of entertainment in what it reads. The same generation of writers has never read beyond Stephen King and thinks that expanding the frontiers of horror fiction means going for the grosser gross-out. The result is rather like shoving your basic chainsaw-zombies tape into the VCR and fast-forwarding through all the dull bits between the bare tits and the exploding heads. No need to think, and no one expects you to. Put your brain in park, and pass the Twinkies and salsa.

Well, that's enough for the bad news. The good news is that quite a lot of excellent horror fiction manages to get published despite all this. And, if we consider Sturgeon's Law that 90% of everything makes good organic fertilizer, then it follows that there's hope for the remaining 10% -- and thus if there's twice as much horror fiction as before, then that 10% is twice as big. Just a matter of sorting through that twice-as-big 90% to find the good stuff.

There is another positive side to this helter-skelter proliferation. Readers' tastes mature, become sophisticated. Writers grow up. There will be the inevitable attrition: the kid who isn't all that upset when his mom dumps his comics collection after he gets married; the garage-band star who puts up his K-Mart keyboard at a garage sale. Sturgeon said: 90% ker-flush. The other 10% is in there for the kill. That's why the horror field is growing stronger and getting better, despite all the crap it takes and the crap it cranks out.

What bothers me more about the horror genre just now is a frenetic trend toward fragmentation. It's almost as if the genre seems poised on the brink of a Beirut-style civil war -- tolerate no disbelievers, accept no compromises, take no prisoners. Most obvious has been the sniping over the past decade between advocates of "quiet horror" and of (presumably) "loud horror." To an extent this is all merely a continuation of the earlier quarrel between fans of traditional horror and those of contemporary horror. It's all getting to be a bit strident, and the pursuit of excellence is too often abandoned in favor of pointless extremism. Because a story is dead boring dull, it is not necessarily literary horror. Writing about a Roto-Rooter rapist does not necessarily push back the frontiers of horror's future.

Well, each to his own tastes, and I have no problem with magazines and anthologies that are restricted to one given approach to what is actually a highly diversified genre. These basically are further examples of the theme anthologies so popular today: collections devoted to haunted houses, dead rock stars, holiday

seasons, zombies, or -- if you will -- dark fantasy or splatter punk.

I do, however, have misgivings concerning a present trend to limit anthologies to special groups of writers. Recently we have seen a good number of by-invitation-only anthologies as well as collections restricted to women writers only or to British writers only. Something doesn't feel right here.

Granted that there is always incentive for an editor to include as many Big Name authors as possible; granted that no one enjoys reading through the slush pile; granted that editors do tend to keep their friends in mind -- but what about the No Name authors who are trying to be heard? If the "Members Only" attitude rankles, then I find those anthologies, which arbitrarily exclude entire groups of writers far more invidious. While this may be considered an approach toward thematic unity, I can imagine the outcry if an editor announced an anthology restricted to male authors only. After that, perhaps, WASP writers only?

As a writer, I like to believe that my stories can stand on his or her own against the competition and be judged by their merit. If an editor bounces a story because it isn't good enough or it isn't right for the anthology, that's fair enough. Every writer deserves a fair chance. As an editor, I've always tried to maintain the same open policy that I'd expect if I were submitting a story to *The Year's Best Horror Stories*. After all, I used to submit stories to *The Year's Best Horror Stories* back when Gerald W. Page was editor -- and Jerry bounced as many as he bought.

And now we come to *The Year's Best Horror Stories: XVIII*.

Once again, you'll find a few big name writers, quite a few who may well become the big name writers of this decade, and quite a few who probably won't. About a third of these writers are making their first appearance in *The Year's Best Horror Stories*, proof that new blood is flowing freely.

And this time you have an alphabet of horror -- twenty-six stories and poems ranging from angst to zombies. Regardless of your favorite tastes in horrors, you're going to find plenty to feast on here -- from gothic to gore, from science fiction to surreal, from traditional to experimental, from *frisson* to fried brains.

Twenty-six. Count 'em. Angst to zombies. In all its many shapes and shades, this is state-of-the-art horror as we closed out the 1980s.

Stay tuned to this channel, and I'll be back to take you on a tour through the 1990s.

-- Karl Edward Wagner Chapel Hill, North Carolina

Kaddish

by Jack Dann

Born in Johnson City, New York on February 15, 1945, Jack Dann and his wife, Jeanne Van Buren Dann, now live in Binghamton, New York in a large old house with plenty of room for books. Good job that, as Dann has written or edited well over twenty books. Recent books include his mainstream novel, Counting Coup, and an anthology of stories concerned with the Vietnam War, In the Fields of Fire, edited in collaboration with his wife. Dann's latest major project is a novel about Leonardo da Vinci, which, at the start of this decade, was at 400 pages and going strong. Dann's short fiction approaches horror in a quiet, moving style that creates powerful and disturbingly reflective moods. Very often he makes use of Jewish themes and history, as is the case with "Kaddish." Regarding this story, Dann argues: "It's got to be the only story written this year about Jewish horror! (We should all live and be well!)" Don't know about that, Jack, but it's clear that horror isn't bound by religion or creed -- this story will give everyone a chill.

What ails you, O sea, that you flee?

-- Psalm of Hallel

Nathan sat with the other men in the small prayer-room of the synagogue. It was 6:40 in the morning. "One of the three professors who taught Hebrew Studies at the university was at the bema, the altar, leading the prayers. His voice intoned the Hebrew and Aramaic words; it was like a cold stream running and splashing over ice. Nathan didn't understand Hebrew, although he could read a little, enough to say the Kaddish, the prayer for the dead, in a halting fashion.

But everything was rushed here in this place of prayer, everyone rocking back and forth and flipping quickly through the well-thumbed pages in the black siddur prayer books. Nathan couldn't keep up with the other men, even when he read and scanned the prayers in English. Young boys in jeans and designer T-shirts prayed ferociously beside their middle-aged fathers, as if trying to outdo them, although it was the old men who always finished first and had time to talk football while the others caught up. Only the rabbi with his well-kept beard and embroidered yarmulke sat motionless before the congregation, Ms white linen prayer shawl wrapped threateningly around him like a shroud, as if to emphasize that he held the secret knowledge and faith that Nathan could not find.

Nathan stared into his siddur and prayed with the others.

He was the Saracen in the temple, an infidel wearing prayer shawl and phylacteries.

A shoe-polish black leather frontlet containing a tiny inscribed parchment pressed against Nathan's forehead, another was held tight to his biceps by a long strap that wound like a snake around his left arm to circle his middle finger three times. But the flaming words of God contained in the phylacteries did not seem to make the synaptic connection into his blood and brain and sinew. Nevertheless, he intoned the words of the prayers, stood up, bowed, said the kad-dish, and then another kaddish, and he remembered all the things he should have said to his wife and son before they died. He remembered his omissions and commissions, which could not be undone. It was too late even for tears, for he was as hollow as a winter gourd.

And Nathan realized that he was already dead.

A shade that had somehow insinuated himself into this congregation.

But then the service was over. The congregants hurriedly folded their prayer-shawls and wound the leather straps around their phylacteries, for it was 7:45, and they had to get to work. Nathan followed suit, but he felt like an automaton, a simulacrum of himself, a dead thing trying to infiltrate the routines and rituals of the living.

He left the synagogue with the other men. He had an early-morning appointment with an old client who insisted on turning over his substantial portfolio again; the old man had, in effect, been paying Nathan's mortgage for years.

But as Nathan drove his Mercedes coupe down A1A, which was the more picturesque and less direct route to his office in downtown Fort Lauderdale, he suddenly realized that he couldn't go through with it. He couldn't spend another day going through the motions of dictating to his secretary, counseling clients, staring into the electron darkness of a CRT screen, and pretending that life goes on.

He simply couldn't do it....

He made a U-turn, and drove back home to Lighthouse Point. The ocean was now to his right, an expanse of emerald and tourmaline. It brought to mind memories of family outings on the public Lauderdale beaches when his son Michael was a toddler and wore braces to straighten out a birth defect. He

remembered first making love to his wife Helen on the beach. The immensity of the clear, star-filled sky and the dark, unfathomable ocean had frightened her, and afterward she had cried in his arms as she looked out at the sea.

But as Nathan drove past the art-deco style pink cathedral, which was a Lighthouse Point landmark, he realized that he couldn't go home either. How was he going to face the myriad memories inhering in the furniture, bric-a-brac, and framed photographs... the memories that seemed to perspire from the very walls themselves? Helen and Michael would only whisper to him again. He would hear all the old arguments and secret conversations, barely audible but there nevertheless, over the susurrations of the air conditioner....

He parked his car in the circular driveway of his red-roofed, white stucco home and crossed the street to his neighbor's yard, which had direct frontage on the intercoastal.

He was, after all, already a shade; he had only to make a proper passage into the next world.

And with the same calm, directed purpose that had served him so well in business over the years, Nathan borrowed his neighbor's hundred thousand dollar "cigarette" speedboat and steered it out to sea to find God.

He piloted the glossy green bullet through the intercoastals, motoring slowly, for police patrolled the quiet canals in search of offenders who would dare to churn the oily, mirrored waters into foam and froth. Yachts and sailboats gently tilted and rolled in their marinas, a gas station attendant with a red scarf around his neck leaned against an Esso gas pump that abutted a wide-planked dock where petroleum drippings shivered like rainbows caught in the wood, and the waterside pools and sun decks of the pastel-painted, expensive homes were empty.

Nathan smelled the bacon and coffee and gasoline, but could hear and feel only the thrumming of the twin engines of the speedboat. The bow reminded him of the hood of an old Lincoln he had loved: expansive and curved and storeroom shiny.

As Nathan turned out of the intercoastal and into the terrifying turquoise abyss of the open sea, he felt that he had escaped the bondage that had been his life.

The calm rolling surface of the sea had become time itself. Time was no longer insubstantial and ineffable; it was a surface that could be navigated. And Nathan could steer this roaring twin-engined speedboat forward toward destiny and

death, or he could return to the past... to any or all of the events of his life that floated atop the flowing surface of his life like plankton.

Nathan was finally the engine of his soul.

He opened the throttle, and the "cigarette" seemed to lift out of the water, which slid past underneath like oil, sparkling green and blue in the brilliance of morning.

Dressed in a herringbone blue suit of continental cut, starched white shirt with rounded French cuffs, and maroon striped tie worked into a Windsor knot, he sat straight as a die before the enamel control console of tachometers, clutches, oil-pressure and fuel gauges, compass, wheel, and throttles.

He felt a quiet, almost patrician joy. He had conquered time and space and pain and fear.

He didn't care about fuel.

His only direction was the eternal horizon ahead.

It all changed when the engines gave out, coughing and sputtering into a final silence like bad lungs taking a last glottal breath. Nathan felt the constriction of the tight collar of his silk shirt; he was wet with perspiration. The sun burned into his face and eyes, blinding him with white light turned red behind closed eyelids, and wrenching him awake. It was as if he had been dreaming, sleepwalking through all the aching, guilt-ridden days since the death of his family three months ago today.

He loosened his tie, tore open his collar. He felt short of breath. It was blisteringly hot, and there was no protection from the sun in the cigarette speedboat. He pulled off his jacket. He was breathing hard, hyperventilating, thinking that he must somehow get back to shore. What have I done? he asked himself, incredulous. He felt feverish, hot then cold, and his teeth were chattering.

The waves slapped against the hull, which bobbed up and down and to the left and right; and Nathan could feel the sea pulling him toward death and its handmaiden of unbearable revelation.

He looked behind him, but there was not a shadow of land. Just open sea, liquid turquoise hills descending and rising. He tried to start the engines, but they wouldn't catch. The console lights dimmed from the drainage of power. He looked in the sidewells for extra fuel and oars but found only canvas, an opened package of plastic cups, and a very good brand of unblended scotch. No first-aid kit, no

flares, for his neighbor was not fastidious, nor did he ever take the boat out of the intercoastal. This was probably the first time that the throttle had ever been turned to full. The boat was a status symbol, nothing more.

The compass read East, which was impossible, for if that were so, he would see land.

But east was the direction of God.

And the sea had become a manifestation of that direction.

The swells were higher now, and the boat rose and dipped, each time being pulled farther out, and the hours passed like days, and Nathan felt hungry and thirsty and frightened.

He thought he saw something on the horizon and stood up as best he could in the boat; he held tight to the chrome pillar of the windshield, and yes, there was something out there. A ship, a tanker, perhaps. He shouted into the soughing silence of the sea, but it was futile. It was as if he were being hidden in the troughs of the waves.

Hours later, when he was cried out and hoarse, cowed by the infinities of sea and sky and the desiccating heat of the sun, which had transformed itself into a blinding, pounding headache, he turned around. As if he could hide in his own shadow from the sun.

And as if turned to stone, he gazed into the past.

But not far into the past.

Not far enough to savor a moment of comfort before the tsunamis of guilt and grief.

Nathan returns to the morning that burns him still. He is shaving, his face lathered with soap from his chipped shaving mug that had once belonged to his grandfather, when Helen calls him. He can hear the muffled argument that has been going on downstairs between his wife and son, but he ignores it for as long as he can.

He simply can't face any more tension.

"Nathan!" Helen shouts, pushing the bathroom door open. "Didn't you hear me calling you?" She is a tiny woman, slender and heart-faced, with long, thick brown hair. She does not look thirty-eight, although Nathan, who is considered

good-looking, if not handsome, because of his weathered, broad-featured face and shock of gray hair, looks every one of his forty years. "Michael's late for school again," she says. "He's missed the bus. And when I told him I'd take him to school, he told me to fuck off."

"That's not what I said." Michael appears behind his mother; he is sixteen and dressed in baggy slacks and a carefully torn T-shirt. His hair is swept back from his forehead and sprayed to a lacquered shine. He looks like his mother, and has her temperament. Flushed with anger and frustration, he says, "I told her I'd take the next bus, which I could have taken, if she would have let me out of the house to catch it. Now it's too late."

"Your mother said she'd take you to school."

"I don't want her taking me to school. I can't stand her."

"Well, I am taking you," Helen said, "and as a consequence for what you said to me, you're grounded this weekend."

"I didn't say anything to you!"

"Nathan," she said, turning to him, "he's lying again. He told me to fuck myself."

"I am not lying," Michael shouts. "And I didn't say 'fuck yourself,' I said 'fuck it' because nobody can talk sense to you. All you can do is scream and ground me every five minutes. I already bought tickets to The Flack concert," he says to Nathan, "and I'm going, whether she likes it or not. I've tried to be nice to her all week, but it's impossible."

Nathan wipes the soap from his face and, trying to remain calm, says, "We've talked about using that kind of language to your mother. It's got to stop...."

But there can be no quiet and rational resolve, for the family dynamics inevitably overpower him.

The argument gains momentum.

Michael is swearing and crying in frustration. Helen finally grabs him by his T-shirt and pushes him against the hallway wall. "I've got to get to work, and you are coming with me. Damn you!"

Michael tries to pull away from her, but she won't let him go. He pushes her, defensively, throwing her off balance.

Seeing that, Nathan shouts, "God damn you both," and rushes into the hallway. Everything is out of control now; it is all visceral response.

He pushes Helen aside and slaps Michael hard on the side of his face.

Helen screams, "I've told you never to strike him."

But before Nathan can recover and bring himself to apologize, they are out of the house.

By sunset the sky was the color of dull metal and filled with storm clouds. Only in the west did the sun bleed through the gray as it settled into the sea, which was pellucid and unnaturally clear. Sheet lightning shot through the massive cloud countries as the temperature dropped, and the humidity seemed to roll off the sea like mist, soon to be rain.

Nathan's fever thoughts burned like his red, broken skin. There was no food, no water to drink, just the slight smell of gasoline and the salty tang of the sea. It became dark, and still Nathan sat and stared into the transparent depths of the sea, as if he were looking for something he had lost. Sometime during the agony of afternoon, he had stopped thinking about rescue. That idea had become as distant as a childhood dream.

Now, his mind raw from the sun, he watched and waited, and as expected, something was swimming up from the depths. A vague shape rose through veils of green darkness, followed by others. Fins broke the surface of the water, and twenty-foot thresher sharks circled the boat. Then other fish appeared just below the surface: marlin and sea-bass, dolphin and barracuda, all circling, until the sea in all directions was filled with all manner of fish, from the smallest four-eye to sixty-foot star-speckled whale sharks.

It grew dark, and the water was lit now by moonlight and pocked by the rain that began to fall. The rain was cold on Nathan's raw skin, and it looked as if its own silvery light illuminated each droplet.

And as the rain struck the water, the fish became frenzied. They began to tear at each other, as if in a feeding madness. Huge white sharks snapped and gored the smaller tiger and mako sharks, while the barracuda cut sailfish and cobia and tarpon into bloody gobbets of meat.

Nathan could feel them smashing against the hull like hammers, and the ocean began to boil with the carnage.

Then, as if in concert, the storm exploded in claps and rolls of thunder and

torrents of rain; and the ocean responded with high waves that almost turned over the speedboat. Reeking fish slammed into the cigarette's cockpit, as if thrown from the sky, splashing Nathan with blood and entrails. Lightning veined the moon, magnified by the atmosphere into a lifeless sun.

Nathan huddled inside the boat, pressing his legs and back against the fiberglass to prevent himself from being flung into the sea. The rain was cold, as was the seawater spraying over him, yet each raindrop and salty spindrift burned him. He raised his head one last time to look around, only to see that it was raining fire. The ocean was illuminated, as if by blue flame; and the sky glowed like cinders.

The sea was a bloodbath.

And as his heart stopped and his breath caught in his throat --

Nathan sits behind his desk in his three-windowed, mahogany-paneled office. He is looking at the rouged and concerned face of a wealthy dowager client as he learns of the death of his wife and son.

He listens to the voice on the phone describing the accident and feels himself freezing into shock. He can only stare at the dowager's huge emerald earrings, as if the green stones are tiny tablets: the emerald grimoires of Solomon, which contain all the answers to the mysteries of life and death and guilt and anger.

Dawn revealed the bloated bodies and remains of thousands of fish that floated like gray driftwood on the calm swells of the ocean. A few cumulus clouds drifted across the sky, as if to separate the chilly perfection of Heaven from the ruin below. Nathan awakened with a jolt, as if from a nightmare, only to find that all was as it had been. Repelled, he threw an eel and an ugly, spiny sargassum fish back into the sea.

He felt nauseated, but he had had the dry heaves during the night; there was nothing left in his stomach to expel. He had even tried to eat the fish that had landed in the cockpit of the speedboat, but the reek was so great that he couldn't manage to bite into the putrescent flesh. He was thirsty, but the sea was salt. Here was food and water all around him, yet he was starving and dehydrated. And naked. His clothes were not anywhere to be seen. Perhaps he had torn them off to relieve his burning skin. Nathan's flesh seemed to be pulling away from his bones. It was so scorched that his shoulders and face and arms were bleeding.

The empty bottle of scotch rolled on the fiberglass floor of the speedboat, catching the sun.

The hours passed. Nathan tried not to look at the sea, filled with the miles of decaying flesh and stink, but he could not stare into the sky forever. He surveyed the countries of flesh and sea around him, a sargasso mire that seemed endless, and he noticed something shiny bobbing in the water. It was the silver breastplate of a satin Torah covering. He scanned the ocean and found a Torah parchment floating, its Hebrew letters black mirrors reflecting the sun and sky above. Bits and pieces of the ark floated in the debris. Open prayer books seemed to move beneath the surface of the water like manta rays, their black covers dull and the golden letters washed away.

But the holy objects and bloody flesh seemed to form letters, signs, and portents that Nathan could not read. Yet when he reached for a prayer book floating beside the hull, it began to sink into the dark, shadowed water, to become a distant memory. As Nathan looked into the water that was as clear and still as the past, he remembered: His son, dressed in a new black suit, leading the Shacharis service at his bar mitzvah; his own wedding in a rundown, glot-kosher hotel in Miami Beach, Helen nervous around his eighty-year-old aunts, who insisted that she step on Nathan's foot for luck when he ceremoniously crushed the wineglass wrapped in a napkin; Helen taking him in her arms to tell him that his father had died; and the arguments and lovemaking and Sabbath candles; Michael stealing the family car, introducing him to his first "serious" girlfriend, who seemed afraid to look up from her plate at the dinner table....

All the tiny realizations of changes and transitions seemed to be floating, objects on the sea.

But like the prayer book, the fish and carrion and scrolls and salt-stained pieces of the holy Ark began to sink; and Nathan was left staring into the empty green-hazed depths, as if he were looking once again into the green stone of Solomon.

The sea was like a mirror, so still and perfect that it seemed to harden into emerald. It was time itself, and in it he could see his own reflection.

If only Nathan could pass through its face.

He could see himself.

He could see....

Nathan sat with the other men in the small prayer-room of the synagogue and felt the divine presence. The ancient kabbalists called it the Shekhinah, the bride of God.

It was 6:40 in the morning, and Nathan couldn't discern what was different, but he felt something. The morning light was like blue smoke diffusing through the high, narrow stained-glass windows. Dust motes danced in the air, shivering in the air-conditioned morning. Nathan put on his tallit and phylacteries and recited the blessing and the Akeidah and the Shema and other supplications. The other men sat beside him and behind him and prayed as they did every morning. Their smells and clothes were the same, and the prayers were almost hypnotic in their monotonous intonation. A young man hummed nasally, as was his habit, throughout the prayers. One of the three professors who taught Hebrew Studies at the university was at the bema, leading the prayers. His voice intoned the Hebrew and Aramaic words.

And Nathan felt the presence of his dead son and wife sitting beside him.

He couldn't see them, not with the same eyes that stared straight ahead at the red satin curtains of the Holy Ark; but he sensed their presence nevertheless. As he prayed, he could hear Michael's voice... his own voice.

Young men of Michael's age paced nervously around the room; they were wrapped protectively in their prayer-shawls, and the light seemed to cling to them.

Perhaps they sensed the Shekhinah, too.

Helen leaned against him. She was a shadow, barely palpable, but Nathan knew it was his wife.

Her body was the silk of his prayer shawl, her breath was Sabbath spices, and her fingers were as cool as the leather frontlets on his arm and forehead. As she whispered to him, his past became as concentrated as old liquors.

His life became an instant of unbearable fire, blinding him. But she released him, freed him from his immolating guilt, as the prayers for the dead drifted and curled through the morning light like smoke, then fell to rest like ashes.

Then the service was over and the Shekhinah evaporated, its holy presence melting like snow in the furnace of another Florida morning. The congregants, seemingly deaf and blind to the miracle that had swept past them, hurriedly folded their prayer-shawls and wound the leather straps around their phylacteries, for it was 7:45, and they had to get to work.

Nathan left the synagogue with the other men. He had an early-morning appointment with an old client. As he drove his Mercedes coupe down A1A, which was the more picturesque and less direct route to his office in downtown Fort

Lauderdale, he passed the resorts and grand hotels, the restaurants and seedy diners, and the endless lots of kitsch motels with neon signs in their plate glass windows and hosts of plastic pink flamingos on their lawns.

He gazed out at the ocean. It was an expanse of emerald and tourmaline. Except for the whitecaps, which were long fingers gently pulling at the sand, the sea was quiet. Nathan turned off the air-conditioner and pressed the toggles on his armrest to open all the windows.

The humidity rushed in with the pungent smell of brine, and Nathan felt his face grow wet with perspiration and tears.

Then he detoured back to the highway.

The electric windows glided up, shutting out the world; the hum of the air-conditioner muffled the honking of the early morning rush hour combatants; and the news announcer on the radio reported on the rescue of a businessman naked and adrift on a speedboat near Miami.

But even now, Nathan could sense the Shekhinah.

He could hear his son's voice and feel the cool, gentle touch of Helen's fingers upon his arms and perspiring forehead.

Yet in the reflection of the curving, tinted windshield, he could still see himself burning on the sea.

The Gravedigger's Tale

by Simon Clark

Born on 10, 1958 in Wakefield, West Yorkshire Clark earlier appeared in The Year's Best Horror Stories: XIV with a story reprinted from the obscure British small press magazine, Back, Brain Recluse. This same publisher has recently brought out a collection of Clark's stories, Blood & Grit, and Clark claims that his "discovery" in The Year's Best Horror Stories is responsible for opening other doors in the publishing world, with magazine sales to Fear, Stygian Dreamhouse, Works, and Aklo. Think I'll ask for a commission.

The inspiration for this story lies in dark's passion for graveyards, which, he maintains, never seem to him to be morbid places. Among earliest memories are those of his schoolmaster father taking him to view mountain cemeteries where subsidence had torn open the graves to reveal skeletons that had been turned banana yellow by salts in the soil.

Clark is married with one son and lives in the Yorkshire village of Adwick-le-street, within a skull's throw of a graveyard that contains the tomb of an ancestor of George Washington. This sixteenth century tomb bears a Stars and Stripes design in the coat of arms and will almost certainly figure in another of his stories.

"Jesus!" exclaimed the electrician as he levered the back off the big one hundred cubic foot chest freezer. "What did you have to dig them back up for?"

Weathered brown, whip-lean, sixty-plus, half-Smoked cigarette behind one ear, the gravedigger grinned, displaying an uneven row of yellow chips that had once been teeth; he leaned forward, bare wrinkled elbows resting on the freezer lid.

"The new by-pass. It's going to take half the graveyard yonder, so before they lay the road, we have to lift 'em and plant 'em in the new municipal ground up Borough Road."

Pulling a face, the electrician wipe the palms of his hands on his overalls. "There must have been some ... some sights. Well, they've been dead years."

"Aye. First one were interred in 1836. So... most of the coffins were well rotted. Soon as you tried to lift 'em," -- he made a wet crackling sound -- "they just folded -- just folded like wet cardboard boxes. And everything -- everything spilled out into a heap." The gravedigger waited for the young man's reaction.

"Jesus." He wiped his mouth as if something small but extremely unpleasant had just buzzed into it. "You must have a strong stomach."

The gravedigger recognized the infection in the young man's voice. Disquiet, distaste, unease. He eyed the electrician up and down. I floppy white hat, slack mouth and wide-eyed gormless look signaled, here was a lad who'd believe anything; the kind that cropped up on every factory floor, in every shop and office, who, when asked, would conscientiously hurry to the storeman to ask for the long-wait, or the jar of elbow-grease, or packet of Featherlite. The gravedigger had been steeling himself for a dull afternoon of ten Woodbines, five cups of tea and a solo darts tournament, but a faulty freezer in the cemetery store-cum-restroom, and fate, had brought entertainment in the shape of the young electrician who was, realized the gravedigger, as green as he was cabbage-looking. "I'm just brewing up. You'll want a wet when you've done."

"Oh, ta. Trouble is with this unit, it's been too near the window. Direct sunlight makes them overheat. Shouldn't take long though." He looked round the untidy, brick floored room. Spades, shovels, picks, rusting iron bars leaned into dusty corners, fading graveyard plans curled away from the corrugated iron walls; at the far end was a table cluttered with chipped mugs, cigarette cartons, stained milk bottles; above, an asbestos ceiling punctuated by dozens of tiny corpses -- spiders that had died and been mummified by the dry air.

"Are the others out, you know, digging?" asked the electrician conversationally.

"Aye." The old man accurately tossed tea bags into two-pint pots. "They're working up the top-side. Look." He pointed a yellow-brown nicotine stained finger. Through a grimy, cobwebbed window two men could be seen digging in the graveyard. "That's where they're going to plant James Hudson, the old Mayor. Top-side, you see, is where all your nobs are -- doctors, solicitors, aldermen. Bottom-side is for your working folk and paupers."

"And that's where the new road's going through." The young man returned to work, prising at cables with a screwdriver.

"Aye... that's where they all had to be dug up." The gravedigger licked his lips. "Disinterred, aye." Taking the kettle from a solitary electric ring, he limped to the freezer top to fill the mugs with boiling water, and then he paused, staring thoughtfully at the rising steam. "Aye, a bad business this disinterring. You see some things so bad it makes you fair poorly. You know in some of the older graves, well, we opened coffins and found that they..."

The electrician's eyes opened wide.

"Well. They'd moved."

"Moved? The bodies had moved?"

"Well sometimes, years ago, people were buried alive. Not deliberately of course. 'Spect some were in comas so deep they were certified dead. They buried them. Course, then they woke up." He glanced at the electrician to see if he appreciated its full significance. "No air, no light. They'd be suffocating, trying to fight their way out. But six feet down. No one would ever hear 'em. There they screamed, fought, clawed at the lid, breathed up all the oxygen and then... well, they died."

"What did they look like?"

"Oh... terrible. You see, natural salts in the soil preserve 'em, only turns 'em bright yellow. Apart from that they looked the same as the day they died. Like this." Eyes wide open; his face the distillation of pure terror, panic, and the gravedigger hooked his brown fingers into talons and contorted his body as if twisted by unendurable agony. "They just froze like that, like statues."

"Jesus... that's awful."

"Oh, I've seen worse, lad."

"Wh-what was the worst you've seen." The young man gulped at his tea.

"Ah... that was two days ago. When we disinterred Rose Burswick. When we opened the lid we saw... ah no... no." He shook his head gravely and slurped his tea. "No. It's so bad I can't bring myself to... no."

But he did go on to describe others in lurid detail. "Old Walter Weltson. My uncle was a gravedigger when they planted him -- summer of 1946. Weltson was the fattest man in the country -- twenty stone or more. It took so long to build a coffin that the meat-flies got him. Ah... when we opened his coffin up it were like opening a box of long-grain rice. Couldn't see him. Just this mound of maggots all white and hard like dried rice. Then it rained. My God, I'll never eat rice pudding again. Look." The gravedigger pointed to something small and white on the brick floor. "There's one. Must've trod it in on me boots." The gravedigger watched with satisfaction as the young man nervously peered at the white morsel.

"Oh, Christ," he murmured loosening his shirt collar. "Awful."

"Then there was..." The gravedigger had stories involving worms, rats; even rabbits -- "you see, the rabbits had tunneled down and built nests in the coffins, and we found the baby rabbits scampering about inside the empty rib-cages" -- and there were stories about valuable jewelry, about pennies on eyes -- "of course when the eyeballs dried they stuck to the pennies, so when you lifted the pennies..." -- and then back to maggots and... The gravedigger noticed the young man's attention had wandered, he even finished replacing the freezer back plate and swigged off his tea without really taking any notice of what he was being told.

Time to play the ace.

Sighing, the gravedigger lit the butt that had been tucked snugly behind his ear. "You know, I can't get that last one we dug up out of my mind. Aye, Rose Burswick."

The electrician's eyes focused on the gravedigger. "You mean that really... awful one?"

"Aye. The worst." Sombre faced, but inwardly gleeful, the gravedigger tragically put his head in his hands. "The worst ever. And I've seen some terrible things in my time."

The young man was hooked. "What happened?"

"Well. Promise you'll tell no one."

"You can trust me, mister."

"Remember the old factory down by the river?"

"Yeah, that's the one that got sealed off with those radiation warning signs."

"That is because during World War One," the gravedigger jabbed the glowing tab into the air for emphasis, "that's where they painted luminous faces on watches, ships' instruments and such-like."

"Uh?"

"Then, what they used to make things luminous was radium. And radium is radioactive. They took girls, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen years old, to apply this stuff to watch faces. Course, nobody knew what radiation did to you. Most of the factory girls were dead before they were twenty -- just rotted away. Rose Burswick worked there five years. She'd use a little brush to paint the radium on. Trouble is it dried quickly so she'd lick the brush every couple of minutes to keep it moist. Each

time she did that, she must have swallowed a few flakes of radium."

"Jesus. It's a wonder it didn't kill her."

The gravedigger shrugged. "It did -- at least that's what they said. In 1935 Rose Burswick was buried -- she was thirty-six."

"Bet she was a mess, living that long after."

"Aye, but that's not the worst of it. Like I said, two days ago we opened the grave."

"Ugh... what did you find?"

The gravedigger rubbed his eyes as if trying to erase some terrible image. "Well... we lifted the coffin, it were intact. It was then I noticed where the lid met the coffin there was like this pale yellow trim round the edge. Funny, I thought, but reckoned it were just a bit of mold. Anyway, when we came to prize off the lid it -- it just flew off, like the top off a Jack-in-a-box."

"Jesus Johnnie!"

"And inside... inside it were full. Ram-jam full to the brim."

The electrician rubbed the back of his hand across his mouth. "Full of what?"

The gravedigger shrugged. "Rose Burswick." He pulled on his cigarette, hard. "They say she weighed six stone when they buried her. But when we opened that coffin it were like opening a carton of ice cream. There were just this big block -- bright yellow. It were as if it had grown and grown until the coffin side had stopped it growing any bigger. But even then, pressure inside had been so great it were being forced through the crack between the lid and coffin, making that yellow trim. Course, we just thought it were some kind of fungus, so we tipped it out. It came out like a banana jelly from a mold. On the grass was that yellow block -- coffin shaped."

"What -- what'd happened to Rose Burswick?"

"Oh... that's just it. It was Rose Burswick."

"Christ! How?"

"Mue-tay-shun." The gravedigger rolled the word around his mouth like a juicy morsel. "Mue-tay-shun."

You see, the radiation'd caused her to mutate in the grave. The coffin had become her -- her second womb. And she like... gestated... aye, evolved into something that -- well -- was not human."

"Did you touch it?"

"Not on your nelly. We ran like hell. But when the Cemetery Board found out, we had to go back to... IT." The gravedigger leaned back against the freezer. "We found it had changed. Just sort of a soft mound and, aye, it had grown. Tuesday was that sunny day -- scorching hot. The heat must have brought it on, and it were growing fast."

"Jesus. Then what?"

"We tried to lever it into a skip to take it down to the Crem. Burn it. But... but it'd taken root. Mue-tay-shun caused what were left of the intestin' to grow and worm into the earth like a long yellow snake. It ended up us cutting it through with a shovel. She... it screamed. Pain, real pain! God, it were a nightmare. Then -- there it were up and moving. What were left of her arms and legs had turned into like swollen yellow stumps with back-to-front feet and hands that had twisted up into hooves like... oh, I tell you -- revolting.

"It were growing dark and we were trying to get into the hut. That's when we noticed the worse part. I held a torch to it and looked at it close up. This yellow stuff were almost transparent, like yellow jelly and I -- I could see inside it."

The young man's eyes bulged. "What ya' see?"

"Terrible. Just under the surface, about four, maybe six inches down through this thick jelly, I could see -- clearly see -- Rose Burswick's face. Or what was left of it. Wide, staring eyes coming out of their sockets three inches or more like red raw sausages. The tongue... long, thrusting out the mouth, up through the skin until the top wiggled all pink and wet above the surface. Aye, and the mouth... opening, shutting like this." Wordlessly, he solemnly slapped his lips together like a goldfish. "I reckon she were trying to say something; call for help. You know, that expression on her face will stick in my mind forever. Sheer terror, like -- like a continual state of shock, as if she knew what had happened... mue-tay-shun."

"What happened to it?"

"Well. It kept growing. So we had to find a way to stop it."

"And how..." The electrician trailed off in horror as if guessing.

"Sub-zero temperatures." The gravedigger tapped the freezer lid with a nicotine-stained forefinger. "Why else do you think that a cemetery store would keep a freezer." He began to lift the lid. "Look."

"No!" The electrician's voice rose to a shriek. Slamming the part opened lid down, he tightly shut his eyes. "No!"

Enjoying himself hugely, the gravedigger kept a straight face but couldn't keep the mischievous twinkle from his eye. "Suit yourself."

"I -- I -- I've got to go. I'm late." The electrician snatched his tools together, then holding onto his limp, white hat he ran from the building.

The electrician was starting the van when the gravedigger hobbled breathlessly up.

"Hey... oh, my leg is giving me hell. Hey, you've forgotten this." The gravedigger waved the screwdriver in the air.

"Oh, ta." Opening the door, the electrician hurriedly took the screwdriver and tossed it into the back.

"You know, as long as the freezer's working," said the gravedigger, "nothing'll happen. Old Rose Burswick is frozen solid -- like a block of ice cream."

Something occurred to the electrician. "How long since the freezer packed in?"

"Ah... let's see. I saw some water on the floor yesterday mornin', but Bill said, don't bother, it'll only be -- "

"Jesus! It's been off more than twenty-four hours? You're lucky it didn't thaw." He suddenly looked hard at the gravedigger. "You've got it on fast-freeze; on full?"

"No. I haven't touched it. Thought you did."

"It's still switched off! Jesus Johnnie! Just pray we're in time." He jumped out of the van and hurried back in the direction of the hut, the gravedigger trailing behind and grumbling about his dicky leg.

Too late.

They heard a noise from inside like dozens of loose boards being knocked over, a succession of thumps, then with a loud crunch the twin doors burst open.

And what had once been Rose Burswick, swelled and flowed out onto the path. A mass of quivering yellow, the size of a beached whale, it moved as fast as a man could walk.

The gravedigger shouted a warning to the electrician, turned, and then ran. The limp forgotten, he sprinted across the cemetery, leaping clean over headstones at such a hell of a rate it would have drawn murmurs of approval from any two hundred meter hurdles champion.

Luck had deserted the electrician. Stumbling backward over a mound of soil, he slipped and fell into Mayor Hudson's grave-to-be. Down at the bottom, the electrician opened his eyes to darkness. Something had blocked out the daylight. Looking up, he saw that covering the grave like a lid was the yellow form of Rose Burswick. For a second, the sun shone through the yellow to reveal shapes suspended in the translucent body, like fruit suspended in a dessert jelly -- an arm, a leg, splinters of bone, distended internal organs. And a head. The head turned in the jelly; rotating slowly but smoothly until its face was turned, gradually, to the electrician.

The face. That expression...

At the bottom of the cemetery, the gravedigger, scrambling over a brick wall, heard the muffled scream. He wanted to go back and help, he really did, but something drove him from the cemetery as fast as his legs could carry him.

In the grave, the electrician's eyes were fixed on that face as Rose Burswick plopped into the hole.

And after more than sixty years of solitude in her cold and lonely grave, Rose Burswick hugged the handsome young man in the floppy white hat in an embrace that seemed to last forever.

And the expression on her face stayed on the electrician's mind as if burnt there by fire.

She was smiling.

Meeting The Author

by Ramsey Campbell

My mother has often asked me why don't I write children's books instead of that awful horrible stuff. If I could get her to read "Meeting the Author," she might leave well enough alone. Ramsey Campbell here explores the dark side of children's books, and this seems fair enough. After all, Campbell was just a kid of sixteen when he was writing his first book of horror stories (The Inhabitant of the Lake, 1964), while more recently he has edited a collection of grisly delights designed to terrify young readers (The Gruesome Book, 1983). Campbell and his wife now have two little monsters of their own, and I know they're a constant source of inspiration.

Born in Liverpool on January 4, 1946, Ramsey Campbell has become a mainstay of The Year's Best Horror Stories and, indeed, of British horror fiction. Twenty-five years after, with dozens of novels, collections, and anthologies and hundreds of short stories to his credit, Campbell may justly be considered the dean of British horror writers. And he's just a kid of forty-four. Campbell's recent books include Obsession (1985), The Hungry Moon (1986), The Influence (1987), Ancient Images (1989), and Midnight Sun (1990). Just now he's taking a short time out to write a novella, "Needing Ghosts," for Legend and a batch of short stories. In addition, several of his stories are being adapted into graphic form for comic books. Should be fun reading for the kids.

I was young then. I was eight years old. I thought adults knew the truth about most things and would own up when they didn't. I thought my parents stood between me and anything about the world that might harm me. I thought I could keep my nightmares away by myself, because I hadn't had one for years -- not since I'd first read about the little match girl being left alone in the dark by the things she saw and the emperor realizing in front of everyone that he wasn't wearing any clothes. My parents had taken me to a doctor who asked me so many questions I think they were what put me to sleep. I used to repeat his questions in my head whenever I felt in danger of staying awake in the dark.

As I said, I was eight when Harold Mealing came to town. All my parents knew about him was what his publisher told the paper where they worked. My mother brought home the letter she'd been sent at the features desk. "A celebrity's coming to town," she said, or at least that's what I remember her saying, and surely that's what counts.

My father held up the letter with one hand while he cut up his meat with his fork. " 'Harold Mealing's first book Beware of the Smile takes its place among the classics of children's fiction,' " he read. "Well, that was quick. Still, if his publishers say so that's damn near enough by itself to get him on the front page in this town."

"I've already said I'll interview him."

"Robbed of a scoop by my own family." My father struck himself across the forehead with the letter and passed it to me. "Maybe you should see what you think of him too, Timmy. He'll be signing at the bookshop."

"You might think of reviewing his book now we have children writing the children's page," my mother added. "Get some use out of that imagination of yours."

The letter said Harold Mealing had written "a return to the old-fashioned moral tale for children -- a story which excites for a purpose." Meeting an author seemed an adventure, though since both my parents were journalists, you could say I already had. By the time he was due in town I was so worked up I had to bore myself to sleep.

In the morning there was an accident on the motorway that had taken the traffic away from the town, and my father went off to cover the story. Me and my mother drove into town in her car that was really only big enough for two. In some of the streets the shops were mostly boarded up, and people with spray paint who always made my father angry had been writing on them. Most of the town worked at the toy factory, and dozens of their children were queuing outside Books & Things. "Shows it pays to advertise in our paper," my mother said.

Mrs. Trend, who ran the shop, hurried to the door to let my mother in. I'd always been a bit afraid of her, with her pins bristling like antennae in her buns of hair that was black as the paint around her eyes, but her waiting on us like this made me feel grown up and superior. She led us past the toys and stationery and posters of pop stars to the bookshop part of the shop, and there was Harold Mealing in an armchair behind a table full of his book.

He was wearing a white suit and bow tie, but I thought he looked like a king on his throne, a bit petulant and bored. Then he saw us. His big loose face that was spidery with veins started smiling so hard it puffed his cheeks out, and even his gray hair that looked as if he never combed it seemed to stand up to greet us. "This is Mary Duncan from the Beacon," Mrs. Trend said, "and her son Timothy who

wants to review your book."

"A pleasure, I'm sure." Harold Mealing reached across the table and shook us both by the hand at once, squeezing hard as if he didn't want us to feel how soft his hands were. Then he let go of my mother's and held onto mine. "Has this young man no copy of my book? He shall have one with my inscription and my blessing."

He leaned his elbow on the nearest book to keep it open and wrote "To Timothy Duncan, who looks as if he knows how to behave himself: best wishes from the author." The next moment he was smiling past me at Mrs. Trend. "Is it time for me to meet the little treasures? Let my public at me and the register shall peal."

I sat on the ladder people used to reach the top shelves and started reading his book while he signed copies, but I couldn't concentrate. The book was about a smiling man who went from place to place trying to tempt children to be naughty and then punished them in horrible ways if they were. After a while I sat and watched Harold Mealing smiling over all the smiles on the covers of the books. One of the children waiting to have a book bought for him knocked a plastic letter-rack off a shelf and broke it, and got smacked by his mother and dragged out while nearly everyone turned to watch. But I saw Harold Mealing's face, and his smile was wider than ever.

When the queue was dealt with, my mother interviewed him. "A writer has to sell himself. I'll go wherever my paying public is. I want every child who will enjoy my book to be able to go into the nearest bookshop and buy one," he said, as well as how he'd sent the book to twenty publishers before this one had bought it and how we should all be grateful to his publisher. "Now I've given up teaching I'll be telling all the stories I've been saving up," he said.

The only time he stopped smiling was when Mrs. Trend wouldn't let him sign all his books that were left, just some in case she couldn't sell the rest. He started again when I said goodbye to him as my mother got ready to leave. "I'll look forward to reading what you write about my little tale," he said to me. "I saw you were enjoying it. I'm sure you'll say you did."

"Whoever reviews your book won't do so under any coercion," my mother told him, and steered me out of the shop.

That evening at dinner my father said, "So how did it feel to meet a real writer?"

"I don't think he likes children very much," I said.

"I believe Timmy's right," my mother said. "I'll want to read this book before I decide what kind of publicity to give him. Maybe I'll just review the book."

I finished it before I went to bed. I didn't much like the ending, when Mr. Smiler led all the children who hadn't learned to be good away to his land where it was always dark. I woke in the middle of the night, screaming because I thought he'd taken me there. No wonder my mother disliked the book and stopped just short of saying in her review that it shouldn't have been published. I admired her for saying what she thought, but I wondered what Harold Mealing might do when he read what she'd written. "He isn't entitled to do anything, Timmy," my father said. "He has to learn the rules like the rest of us if he wants to be a pro."

The week after the paper printed the review we went on holiday to Spain, and I forgot about the book. When we came home I wrote about the parts of Spain we'd been to that most visitors didn't bother with, and the children's page published what I'd written, more or less. I might have written other things, except I was too busy worrying what the teacher I'd have when I went back to school might be like and trying not to let my parents see I was. I took to stuffing a handkerchief in my mouth before I went to sleep so they wouldn't hear me if a nightmare woke me up.

At the end of the week before I went back to school, my mother got the first phone call. The three of us were doing a jigsaw on the dining table, because that was the only place big enough, when the phone rang. As soon as my mother said who she was, the voice at the other end got so loud and sharp I could hear it across the room. "My publishers have just sent me a copy of your review. What do you mean by saying that you wouldn't give my book to a child?"

"Exactly that, Mr. Mealing. I've seen the nightmares it can cause."

"Don't be so sure," he said, and then his voice went from crafty to pompous. "Since all they seem to want these days are horrors, I've invented one that will do some good. I suggest you give some thought to what children need before you presume to start shaping their ideas."

My mother laughed so hard it must have made his earpiece buzz. "I must say I'm glad you aren't in charge of children any longer. How did you get our home number, by the way?"

"You'd be surprised what I can do when I put my mind to it."

"Then try writing something more acceptable," my mother said, and cut him off.

She'd hardly sat down at the table when the phone rang again. It must have been my imagination that made it sound as sharp as Harold Mealing's voice. This time he started threatening to tell the paper and my school who he was convinced had really written the review. "Go ahead if you want to make yourself look more of a fool," my mother said.

The third time the phone rang, my father picked it up. "I'm warning you to stop troubling my family," he said, and Harold Mealing started wheedling: "They shouldn't have attacked me after I gave them my time. You don't know what it's like to be a writer. I put myself into that book."

"God help you, then," my father said, and warned him again before cutting him off. "All writers are mad," he told us, "but professionals use it instead of letting it use them."

After I'd gone to bed I heard the phone again, and after my parents were in bed. I thought of Harold Mealing lying awake in the middle of the night and deciding we shouldn't sleep either, letting the phone ring and ring until one of my parents had to pick it up, though when they did nobody would answer.

Next day my father rang up Harold Mealing's publishers. They wouldn't tell him where Harold Mealing had got to on his tour, but his editor promised to have a word with him. He must have, because the phone calls stopped, and then there was nothing for days until the publisher sent me a parcel.

My mother watched over my shoulder while I opened the padded bag. Inside was a book called Mr. Smiler's Pop-Up Surprise Book and a letter addressed to nobody in particular. "We hope you are as excited by this book as we are to publish it, sure to introduce Harold Mealing's already famous character Mr. Smiler to many new readers and a state-of-the-art example of pop-up design" was some of what it said. I gave the letter to my mother while I looked inside the book.

At first I couldn't see Mr. Smiler. The pictures stood to attention as I opened the pages, pictures of children up to mischief, climbing on each other's shoulders to steal apples or spraying their names on a wall or making faces behind their teacher's back. The harder I had to look for Mr. Smiler, the more nervous I became of seeing him. I turned back to the first pages and spread the book flat on the table, and he jumped up from behind the hedge under the apple tree, shaking his long arms. On every two pages he was waiting for someone to be curious enough to open the book that little bit farther. My mother watched me, and then she said, "You don't have to accept it, you know. We can send it back."

I thought she wanted me to be grown-up enough not to be frightened by the book. I also thought that if I kept it Harold Mealing would be satisfied, because he'd meant it as an apology for waking us in the night. "I want to keep it. It's good," I said. "Shall I write and say thank you?"

"I shouldn't bother." She seemed disappointed that I was keeping it. "We don't even know who sent it," she said.

Despite the letter, I hoped Harold Mealing might have. Hoped. Once I was by myself I kept turning the pages as if I would find a sign if I looked hard enough. Mr. Smiler jumped up behind a hedge and a wall and a desk, and every time his face reminded me more of Harold Mealing's. I didn't like that much, and I put the book away in the middle of a pile in my room.

After my parents had tucked me up and kissed me good night, early because I was starting school in the morning, I wondered if it might give me nightmares, but I slept soundly enough. I remember thinking Mr. Smiler wouldn't be able to move with all those books on top of him.

My first day at school made me forget him. The teacher asked about my parents, who she knew worked on the paper, and wanted to know if I was a writer too. When I said I'd written some things she asked me to bring one in to read to the class. I remember wishing Harold Mealing could know, and when I got home I pulled out the pop-up book as if that would let me tell him.

At first I couldn't find Mr. Smiler at all. I felt as if he was hiding to give me time to be scared of him. I had to open the book still wider before he came up from behind the hedge with a kind of shivery wriggle that reminded me of a dying insect. Once was enough. I pushed the book under the bottom of the pile and looked for something to read to the class.

There wasn't anything I thought was good enough, so I wrote about meeting Harold Mealing and how he'd kept phoning, pretty well as I've written it now. I finished it just before bedtime. When the light was off and the room began to take shape out of the dark, I thought I hadn't closed the pop-up book properly, because I could see darkness inside it that made me think of a lid, especially when I thought I could see a pale object poking out of it. I didn't dare get up to look. After a while I got so tired of being frightened I must have fallen asleep.

In the morning I was sure I'd imagined all that, because the book was shut flat on the shelf. At school I read out what I'd written. The children who'd been at Books & Things laughed as if they agreed with me, and the teacher said I wrote

like someone older than I was. Only I didn't feel older, I felt as I used to feel when I had nightmares about books, because the moment I started reading aloud I wished I hadn't written about Harold Mealing. I was afraid he might find out, though I didn't see how he could.

When I got home I realized I was nervous of going to my room, and yet I felt I had to go there and open the pop-up book. Once I'd finished convincing my mother that I'd enjoyed my day at school I made myself go upstairs and pull it from under the pile. I thought I'd have to flatten it even more to make Mr. Smiler pop up. I put it on the quilt and started leaning on it, but it wasn't even open flat when he squirmed up from behind the hedge, flapping his arms, as if he'd been waiting all day for me. Only now his face was Harold Mealing's face.

It looked as if part of Mr. Smiler's face had fallen off to show what was underneath, Harold Mealing's face gone gray and blotchy but smiling harder than ever, straight at me. I wanted to scream and rip him out of the book, but all I could do was fling the book across my bed and run to my mother.

She was sorting out the topics she'd be covering for next week's paper, but she dropped her notes when she saw me. "What's up?"

"In the book. Go and see," I said in a voice like a scream that was stuck in my throat, and then I was afraid of what the book might do to her. I went up again, though only fast enough that she would be just behind me. I had to wait until she was in the room before I could touch the book.

It was leaning against the pillow, gaping as if something was holding it open from inside. I leaned on the corners to open it, and then I made myself pick it up and bend it back until I heard the spine creak. I did that with the first two pages and all the other pairs. By the time I'd finished I was nearly sobbing, because I couldn't find Mr. Smiler or whatever he looked like now. "He's got out," I cried.

"I knew we shouldn't have let you keep that book," my mother said. "You've enough of an imagination without being fed nonsense like that. I don't care how he tries to get at me, but I'm damned if I'll have him upsetting any child of mine."

My father came home just then, and joined in. "We'll get you a better book, Timmy, to make up for this old rubbish," he said, and put the book where I couldn't reach it, on top of the wardrobe in their bedroom.

That didn't help. The more my mother tried to persuade me that the pop-up was broken and so I shouldn't care about not having the book, the more I thought about Mr. Smiler's face that had stopped pretending. While we were having dinner

I heard scratchy sounds walking about upstairs, and my father had to tell me it was a bird on the roof. While we were watching one of the programs my parents let me watch on television a puffy white thing came and pressed itself against the window, and I almost wasn't quick enough at the window to see an old bin-liner blowing away down the road. My mother read to me in bed to try and calm me down, but when I saw a figure creeping upstairs beyond her that looked as if it hadn't much more to it than the dimness on the landing, I screamed before I realized it was my father coming to see if I was nearly asleep. "Oh, dear," he said, and went down to get me some of the medicine the doctor had prescribed to help me sleep.

My mother had been keeping it in the refrigerator. It must have been years old. Maybe that was why, when I drifted off to sleep although I was afraid to in case anything came into my room, I kept jerking awake as if something had wakened me, something that had just ducked out of sight at the end of the bed. Once I was sure I saw a blotchy forehead disappearing as I forced my eyes open, and another time I saw hair like cobwebs being pulled out of sight over the footboard. I was too afraid to scream, and even more afraid of going to my parents, in case I hadn't really seen anything in the room and it was waiting outside for me to open the door.

I was still jerking awake when the dawn came. It made my room even more threatening, because now everything looked flat as the hiding-places in the popup book. I was frightened to look at anything. I lay with my eyes squeezed shut until I heard movements outside my door and my father's voice convinced me it was him. When he inched the door open I pretended to be asleep so that he wouldn't think I needed more medicine. I actually managed to sleep for a couple of hours before the smell of breakfast woke me up.

It was Saturday, and my father took me fishing in the canal. Usually fishing made me feel as if I'd had a rest, though we never caught any fish, but that day I was too worried about leaving my mother alone in the house or rather, not as alone as she thought she was. I kept asking my father when we were going home, until he got so irritable that we did.

As soon as he was in his chair he stuck the evening paper up in front of himself. He was meaning to show that I'd spoiled his day, but suddenly he looked over the top of the paper at me. "Here's something that may cheer you up, Timmy," he said. "Harold Mealing's in the paper."

I thought he meant the little smiling man was waiting in there to jump out at me, and I nearly grabbed the paper to tear it up. "Good God, son, no need to look

so timid about it," my father said. "He's dead, that's why he's in. Died yesterday of too much dashing about in search of publicity. Poor old twerp, after all his self-promotion he wasn't considered important enough to put hi the same day's news."

I heard what he was saying, but all I could think was that if Harold Mealing was dead he could be anywhere -- and then I realized he already had been. He must have died just about the time I'd seen his face in the pop-up book. Before my parents could stop me, I grabbed a chair from the dining suite and struggled upstairs with it, and climbed on it to get the book down from the wardrobe.

I was bending it open as I jumped off the chair. I jerked it so hard as I landed that it shook the little man out from behind the hedge. I shut my eyes so as not to see his face, and closed my hand around him, though my skin felt as if it was trying to crawl away from him. I'd just got hold of him to tear him up as he wriggled like an insect when my father came in and took hold of my fingers to make me let go before I could do more than crumple the little man. He closed the book and squeezed it under his arm as if he was as angry with it as he was with me. "I thought you knew better than to damage books," he said. "You know I can't stand vandalism. I'm afraid you're going straight to bed, and think yourself lucky I'm keeping my temper."

That wasn't what I was afraid of. "What are you going to do with the book?"

"Put it somewhere you won't find it. Now, not another word or you'll be sorry. Bed."

I turned to my mother, but she frowned and put her finger to her lips. "You heard your father."

When I tried to stay until I could see where my father hid the book, she pushed me into the bathroom and stood outside the door and told me to get ready for bed. By the time I came out, my father and the book had gone. My mother tucked me into bed and frowned at me, and gave my forehead a kiss so quick it felt papery. "Just go to sleep now and we'll have forgotten all about it in the morning," she said.

I lay and watched the bedroom furniture begin to go flat and thin as cardboard as it got dark. When either of my parents came to see if I was asleep I tried to make them think I was, but before it was completely dark I was shaking too much. My mother brought me some of the medicine and wouldn't go away until I'd swallowed it, and then I lay there fighting to stay awake.

I heard my parents talking, too low for me to understand. I heard one of

them go out to the dustbin, and eventually I smelled burning. I couldn't tell if that was in our yard or a neighbor's, and I was too afraid to get up in the dark and look. I lay feeling as if I couldn't move, as if the medicine had made the bedclothes heavier or me weaker, and before I could stop myself I was asleep.

When I jerked awake I didn't know what time it was. I held myself still and tried to hear my parents so that I'd know they hadn't gone to sleep and left me alone. Then I heard my father snoring in their room, and I knew they had, because he always went to bed last. His snores broke off, probably because my mother had nudged him in her sleep, and for a while I couldn't hear anything except my own breathing, so loud it made me feel I was suffocating. And then I heard another sound in my room.

It was a creaking as if something was trying to straighten itself. It might have been cardboard, but I wasn't sure, because I couldn't tell how far away from me it was. I dug my fingers into the mattress to stop myself shaking, and held my breath until I was almost sure the sound was ahead of me, between the door and me. I listened until I couldn't hold my breath any longer, and it came out in a gasp. And then I dug my fingers into the mattress so hard my nails bent, and banged my head against the wall behind the pillow, because Harold Mealing had risen up in front of me.

I could only really see his face. There was less of it than last time I'd seen it, and maybe that was why it was smiling even harder, both wider and taller than a mouth ought to be able to go. His body was a dark shape he was struggling to raise, whether because it was stiff or crippled I couldn't tell. I could still hear it creaking. It might have been cardboard or a corpse, because I couldn't make out how close he was, at the end of the bed and big as life or standing on the quilt in front of my face, the size he'd been in the book. All I could do was bruise my head as I shoved the back of it against the wall, the farthest I could get away from him.

He shivered upright until his face was above mine, and his hands came flapping toward me. I was almost sure he was no bigger than he'd been in the book, but that didn't help me, because I could feel myself shrinking until I was small enough for him to carry away into the dark, all of me that mattered. He leaned toward me as if he was toppling over, and I started to scream.

I heard my parents waken, far away. I heard one of them stumble out of bed. I was afraid they would be too late, because now I'd started screaming I couldn't stop, and the figure that was smaller than my head was leaning down as if it meant to crawl into my mouth and hide there or drag what it wanted out of me. Somehow I managed to let go of the mattress and flail my hands at him. I hardly knew what I

was doing, but I felt my fist close around something that broke and wriggled, just as the light came on.

Both my parents ran in. "It's all right, Timmy, we're here," my mother said, and to my father "It must be that medicine. We won't give him any more."

I clenched my fist harder and stared around the room. "I've got him," I babbled. "Where's the book?"

They knew which one I meant, because they exchanged a glance. At first I couldn't understand why they looked almost guilty. "You're to remember what I said, Timmy," my father said. "We should always respect books. But listen, son, that one was bothering you so much I made an exception. You can forget about it. I put it in the bin and burnt it before we came to bed."

I stared at him as if that could make him take back what he'd said. "But that means I can't put him back," I cried.

"What've you got there, Timmy? Let me see," my mother said, and watched until I had to open my fist. There was nothing in it except a smear of red that she eventually convinced me was ink.

When she saw I was afraid to be left alone she stayed with me all night. After a while I fell asleep because I couldn't stay awake, though I knew Harold Mealing was still hiding somewhere. He'd slipped out of my fist when I wasn't looking, and now I'd lost my chance to trap him and get rid of him.

My mother took me to the doctor in the morning and got me some new medicine that made me sleep even when I was afraid to. It couldn't stop me being afraid of books, even when my parents sent *Beware of the Smile* back to the publisher and found out that the publisher had gone bankrupt from gambling too much money on Harold Mealing's books. I thought that would only make Harold Mealing more spiteful. I had to read at school, but I never enjoyed a book again. I'd get my friends to shake them open to make sure there was nothing inside them before I would touch them, only before long I didn't have many friends. Sometimes I thought I felt something squirming under the page I was reading, and I'd throw the book on the floor.

I thought I'd grown out of all this when I went to college. Writing what I've written shows I'm not afraid of things just because they're written down. I worked so hard at college I almost forgot to be afraid of books. Maybe that's why he kept wakening me at night with his smile half the height of his face and his hands that feel like insects on my cheeks. Yes, I set fire to the library, but I didn't know what

else to do. I thought he might be hiding in one of those books.

Now I know that was a mistake. Now you and my parents and the rest of them smile at me and say I'll be better for writing it down, only you don't realize how much it's helped me see things clear. I don't know yet which of you smilers Harold Mealing is pretending to be, but I will when I've stopped the rest of you smiling. And then I'll tear him up to prove it to all of you. I'll tear him up just as I'm going to tear up this paragraph.

Buckets

by F. Paul Wilson

"Buckets" marks F. Paul Wilson's first appearance in The Year's Best Horror Stories. Always a pleasure to extend professional courtesy to a fellow MD. Born in New Jersey on May 17, 1946, Wilson blames his misspent youth there on E. C. horror comics, monster films, and rock and roll. He began selling short fiction while a first-year medical student and has been writing fiction and practicing medicine ever since. His best-selling horror novels include The Keep, The Tomb, The Touch, Black Wind, and the recently published Reborn -- the first of three interrelated horror novels forming an extended sequel to The Keep. He is currently at work on the second of this series.

Soft & Others, a collection of short fiction from Wilson's first twenty years as a writer, was published by Tor in 1989. "Buckets," originally written for the aborted anthology, Halloween Horrors II, first appeared in Wilson's well-regarded collection, "sort of buried among the reprints." Makes me wonder what the rest of the stories slated for Halloween Horrors II are like.

"My, aren't you an early bird!"

Dr. Edward Cantrell looked down at the doe-eyed child in the five-and-dime Princess Leia costume on his front doorstep and tried to guess her age. A beautiful child of about seven or eight, with flaxen hair and scrawny little shoulders drawn up as if she were afraid of him, as if he might bite her. It occurred to him that today was Wednesday and it was not yet noon. Why wasn't she in school? Never mind. It was Halloween and it was none of his business why she was getting a jump on the rest of the kids in the trick-or-treat routine.

"Are you looking for a treat?" he asked her.

She nodded slowly, shyly.

"Okay! You got it!" He went to the bowl behind him on the hall table and picked out a big Snickers. Then he added a dime to the package. It had become a Halloween tradition over the years that Dr. Cantrell's place was where you got dimes when you trick-or-treated.

He thrust his hand through the open space where the screen used to be. He liked to remove the storm door screen on Halloween; it saved him the inconvenience of repeatedly opening the door against the kids pressing against it

for their treats; and besides, he worried about one of the little ones being pushed backward off the front steps. A lawsuit could easily follow something like that.

The little girl lifted her silver bucket.

He took a closer look. No, not silver -- shiny stainless steel, reflecting the dull gray overcast sky. It reminded him of something, but he couldn't place it at the moment. Strange sort of thing to be collecting Halloween treats in. Probably some new fad. Whatever became of the old pillowcase or the shopping bag, or even the plastic jack-o'-lantern?

He poised his hand over the bucket, then let the candy bar and dime drop. They landed with a soft squish.

Not exactly the sound he had expected. He leaned forward to see what else was in the bucket but the child had swung around and was making her way down the steps.

Out on the sidewalk, some hundred feet away along the maple-lined driveway, two older children waited for her. A stainless-steel bucket dangled from each of their hands.

Cantrell shivered as he closed the front door. There was a new chill in the air. Maybe he should put on a sweater. But what color? He checked himself over in the hall mirror. Not bad for a guy looking fifty-two in the eye. That was Erica's doing. Trading in the old wife for a new model twenty years younger had had a rejuvenating effect on him. Also, it made him work at staying young looking -- like three trips a week to the Short Hills Nautilus Club and watching his diet. He decided to forgo the sweater for now.

He almost made it back to his recliner and the unfinished New York Times when the front bell rang again. Sighing resignedly, he turned and went back to the front door. He didn't mind tending to the trick-or-treaters, but he wished Erica were here to share door duty. Why did she have to pick today for her monthly spending spree in Manhattan? He knew she loved Bloomingdale's -- in fact, she had once told him that after she died she wanted her ashes placed in an urn in the lingerie department there -- but she could have waited until tomorrow.

It was two boys this time, both about eleven, both made up like punkers with orange and green spiked hair, ripped clothes, and crude tattoos, obviously done with a Bic instead of a real tattooer's pen. They stood restlessly in the chill breeze, shifting from one foot to the other, looking up and down the block, stainless-steel buckets in hand.

He threw up his hands. "Whoa! Tough guys, eh? I'd better not mess around with the likes of -- !"'

One of the boys glanced at him briefly, and in his eyes Cantrell caught a flash of such rage and hatred -- not just for him, but also for the whole world -- that his voice dried away to a whisper. And then the look was gone as if it had never been and the boy was just another kid again. He hastily grabbed a pair of Three Musketeers and two dimes, leaned through the opening in the door, and dropped one of each into their buckets.

The one on the right went squish and the one on the left went plop.

He managed to catch just a glimpse of the bottom of the bucket on the right as the kid turned. He couldn't tell what was in there, but it was red.

He was glad to see them go. Surly pair, he thought. Not a word out of either of them. And what was in the bottom of that bucket? Didn't look like any candy he knew, and he considered himself an expert on candy. He patted the belly that he had been trying to flatten for months. More than an expert -- an aficionado of candy.

Further speculation was forestalled by a call from Monroe Community Hospital. One of his postpartum patients needed a laxative. He okayed a couple of ounces of milk of mag. Then the nurse double-checked his pre-op orders on the hysterectomy tomorrow.

He managed to suffer through it all with dignity. It was Wednesday and he always took Wednesdays off. Jeff Sewell was supposed to be taking his calls today, but all the floors at the hospital had the Cantrell home phone number and they habitually tried here first before they went hunting for whoever was covering him.

He was used to it. He had learned ages ago that there was no such thing as a day off in Ob-Gyn.

The bell rang again, and for half a second Cantrell found himself hesitant to answer it. He shrugged off the reluctance and pulled open the door.

Two mothers and two children. He sucked in his gut when he recognized the mothers as longtime patients.

This is more like it!

"Hi, Dr. Cantrell!" the red-haired woman said with a big smile. She put a

hand atop the red-haired child's head. "You remember Shana, don't you? You delivered her five years ago next month."

"I remember you, Gloria," he said, noting her flash of pleasure at having her first name remembered. He never forgot a face. "But Shana here looks a little bit different from when I last saw her."

As both women laughed, he scanned his mind for the other's name. Then it came to him:

"Yours looks a little bigger, too, Diane."

"She sure does. What do you say to Dr. Cantrell, Susan?"

The child mumbled something that sounded like "Ricky Meat" and held up an orange plastic jack-o'-lantern with a black plastic strap.

"That's what I like to see!" he said. "A real Halloween treat holder. Better than those stainless-steel buckets the other kids have been carrying!"

Gloria and Diane looked at each other. "Stainless-steel buckets?"

"Can you believe it?" he said as he got the two little girls each a Milky Way and a dime. "My first three Halloween customers this morning carried steel buckets for their treats. Never seen anything like it."

"Neither have we," Diane said.

"You haven't? You should have passed a couple of boys out on the street."

"No. We're the only ones around."

Strange. But maybe they had cut back to the street through the trees as this group entered the driveway.

He dropped identical candy and coins into the identical jack-o'-lanterns and heard them strike the other treats with a reassuring rustle.

He watched the retreating forms of the two young mothers and their two happy kids until they were out of sight. This is the way Halloween should be, he thought. Much better than strange hostile kids with metal buckets.

And just as he completed the thought, he saw three small white-sheeted forms of indeterminate age and sex round the hedge and head up the driveway. Each had a shiny metal bucket in hand.

He wished Erica were here.

He got the candy bars and coins and waited at the door for them. He had decided that before he parted with the goodies he was going to find out who these kids were and what they had in their little buckets. Fair was fair.

The trio climbed to the top step of the stoop and stood there waiting, silently watching him through the eye holes of their sheets.

Their silence got under his skin.

Doesn't anybody say "Trick or treat?" anymore?

"Well, what have we here?" he said with all the joviality he could muster. "Three little ghosts! The Ghostly Trio!"

One of them -- he couldn't tell which -- said, "Yes."

"Good! I like ghosts on Halloween! You want a treat?"

They nodded as one.

"Okay! But first you're gonna have to earn it! Show me what you've got in those buckets and I'll give you each a dime and a box of Milk Duds! How's that for a deal?"

The kids looked at each other. Some wordless communication seemed to pass between them, and then they turned and started back down the steps.

"Hey, kids! Hey, wait!" he said quickly, forcing a laugh. "I was only kidding! You don't have to show me anything. Here! Just take the candy."

They paused on the second step, obviously confused.

Ever so gently, he coaxed them back. "C'mon, kids. I'm just curious about those buckets, is all. I've been seeing them all day and I've been wondering where they came from. But if I frightened you, well, hey, I'll ask somebody else later on." He held up the candy and the coins and extended his hand through the door. "Here you go."

One little ghost stepped forward but raised an open hand -- a little girl's hand -- instead of a bucket.

He could not bear to be denied any longer. He pushed open the storm door and stepped out, looming over the child, craning his neck to see into that damn

little bucket. The child squealed in fright and turned away, crouching over the bucket as if to protect it from him.

What are they trying to hide? What's the matter with them? And what's the matter with me?

Really. Who cared what was in those buckets?

He cared. It was becoming an obsession with him. He'd go crazy if he didn't find out.

Hoping nobody was watching -- nobody who'd think he was a child molester -- he grabbed the little ghost by the shoulders and twisted her toward him. She couldn't hide the bucket from him now. In the clear light of day he got a good look into it.

Blood.

Blood with some floating bits of tissue and membrane lay maybe an inch and a half deep in the bottom.

Startled and sickened, he could only stand there and stare at the red, swirling liquid. As the child tried to pull the bucket away from him, it tipped, spilling its contents over the front of her white sheet. She screamed -- more in dismay than terror.

"Let her go!" said a little boy's voice from beside him. Cantrell turned to see one of the other ghosts hurling the contents of its bucket at him. As if in slow motion, he saw the sheet of red liquid and debris float toward him through the air, spreading as it neared. The warm spray splattered him up and down and he reeled back in revulsion.

By the time he had wiped his eyes clear, the kids were halfway down the driveway. He wanted to chase after them, but he had to get out of these bloody clothes first. He'd be taken for a homicidal maniac if someone saw him running after three little kids looking like this.

Arms akimbo, he hurried to the utility room and threw his shirt into the sink. *Why?* his mind cried as he tried to remember whether hot or cold water set a stain. He tried cold and began rubbing at the blood in the blue oxford cloth.

He scrubbed hard and fast to offset the shaking of his hands. What a horrible thing for anyone to do, but especially children! Questions tumbled over each other in confusion: What could be going through their sick little minds? And where had

they gotten the blood?

But most of all, Why me?

Slowly the red color began to thin and run, but the bits of tissue clung. He looked at them more closely. Damn if that doesn't look like...

Recognition triggered an epiphany. He suddenly understood everything.

He now knew who those children were -- or at least who had put them up to it -- and he understood why. He sighed with relief as anger flooded through him like a cleansing flame. He much preferred being angry to being afraid.

He dried his arms with a paper towel and went to call the cops.

"Right-to-lifers, Joe! Has to be them!"

Sergeant Joe Morelli scratched his head. "You sure, Doc?"

Cantrell had known the Morelli family since Joe's days as a security guard at the Mall, waiting for a spot to open up on the Monroe police force. He had delivered all three of Joe's kids.

"Who else could it be? Those little stainless-steel buckets they carry -- the ones I told you about -- they're the same kind we use in D and C's, and get this: We used to use them in abortions. The scrapings from the uterus slide down through a weighted speculum into one of those buckets."

And it was those bloody scrapings that had been splattered all over him.

"But why you, Doc? I know you do abortions now and then -- all you guys do -- but you're not an abortionist per se, if you know what I'm saying."

Cantrell nodded, not mentioning Sandy. He knew the subject of Joe's youngest daughter's pregnancy two years ago was still a touchy subject. She had only been fifteen but he had taken care of everything for Joe with the utmost discretion. He now had a devoted friend on the police force.

A thought suddenly flashed through Cantrell's mind:

They must know about the women's center! But how could they?

It was due to open tomorrow, the first of the month. He had been so careful to avoid any overt connection with it, situating it downtown and going so far as to set it up through a corporate front. Abortions might be legal, but it still didn't sit

well with a lot of people to know that their neighbor ran an abortion mill.

Maybe that was it. Maybe a bunch of sicko right-to-lifers had connected him with the new center.

"What gets me," Joe was saying, "is that if this is real abortion material like you say, where'd they get it?"

"I wish I knew." The question had plagued him since he had called the police.

"Well, don't you worry, Doc," Joe said, slipping his hat over his thinning hair. "Whatever's going on, it's gonna stop. I'll cruise the neighborhood. If I see any kids, or even adults with any of these buckets, I'll ID them and find out what's up."

"Thanks, Joe," he said, meaning it. It was comforting to know a cop was looking out for him. "I appreciate that. I'd especially like to get this ugly business cleared up before the wife and I get home from dinner tonight."

"I don't blame you," he said, shaking his head. "I know I wouldn't want Marie to see any buckets of blood."

The trick-or-treaters swelled in numbers as the afternoon progressed. They flowed to the door in motley hordes of all shapes, sizes, and colors. A steady stream of Spocks, Skywalkers, Vaders, Indiana Joneses, Madonnas, Motley Crues, Twisted Sisters, and even a few ghosts, goblins, and witches.

And always among them were one or two kids with steel buckets.

Cantrell bit his lip and repressed his anger when he saw them. He said nothing, did not try to look into their buckets, gave no sign that their presence meant anything to him, pretended they were no different from the other kids as he dropped candies and coins into the steel buckets among the paper sacks and pillowcases and jack-o'-lanterns, all the while praying that Morelli would catch one of the little bastards crossing the street and find out who was behind this bullshit.

He saw the patrol car pull into the drive around 4:00. Morelli finally must have nailed one of them! About time! He had to leave for the women's center soon and wanted this thing settled and done with.

"No luck, Doc," Joe said, rolling down his window. "You must have scared them off."

"Are you crazy?" His anger exploded as he trotted down the walk to the

driveway. "They've been through here all afternoon!"

"Hey, take it easy, Doc. If they're around, they must be hiding those buckets when they're on the street, because I've been by here about fifty times and I haven't seen one steel bucket."

Cantrell reined in his anger. It would do no good to alienate Joe. He wanted the police force on his side.

"Sorry. It's just that this is very upsetting."

"I can imagine. Look, Doc. Why don't I do this: Why don't I just park the car right out at the curb and watch the kids as they come in. Maybe I'll catch one in the act. At the very least, it might keep them away."

"I appreciate that, Joe, but it won't be necessary. I'm going out in a few minutes and won't be back until much later tonight. However, I do wish you'd keep an eye on the place -- vandals, you know."

"Sure thing, Doc. No problem."

Cantrell watched the police car pull out of the driveway, and then he set the house alarm and hurried to the garage to make his getaway before the doorbell rang again.

The Midtown Women's Medical Center

Cantrell savored the effect of the westering sun glinting off the thick brass letters over the entrance as he walked by. Red letters on a white placard proclaimed "Grand Opening Tomorrow" from the front door. He stepped around the side of the building into the alley, unlocked the private entrance, and stepped inside.

Dark, quiet, deserted. Damn! He had hoped to catch the contractor for one last check of the trim. He wanted everything perfect for the opening.

He flipped on the lights and checked his watch. Erica would be meeting him here in about an hour, and then they would pick up the Klines and have drinks and dinner at the club. He had just enough time for a quick inspection tour.

So dean, he thought as he walked through the waiting room -- the floors shiny and unscuffed, the carpet pile unmatted, the wall surfaces unmarred by chips or finger smudges. Even the air smelled new.

This center -- his center -- had been in the planning stages for three years. Countless hours of meetings with lawyers, bankers, planning boards, architects,

and contractors had gone into it. But at last it was ready to go. He planned to work here himself in the beginning, just to keep overhead down, but once the operation got rolling, he'd hire other doctors and have them do the work while he ran the show from a distance.

He stepped into Procedure Room One and looked over the equipment. Dominating the room was the Rappaport 206, a state-of-the-art procedure table with thigh and calf supports on the stirrups, three breakaway sections, and fully motorized tilts in all planes -- Trendelenburg, reverse Trendelenburg, left and right lateral.

Close by, the Zarick suction extractor -- the most efficient abortion device on the market -- hung gleaming on its chrome stand. He pressed the "on" button to check the power but nothing happened.

"It won't work tonight," said a child's voice behind him, making him almost scream with fright.

He spun around. Fifteen or twenty kids stood there staring at him. Most were costumed, and they all carried those goddamn steel buckets.

"All right!" he said. "This does it! I've had just about enough! I'm getting the police!"

He turned to reach for the phone but stopped after one step. More kids were coming in from the hall.

They streamed in slowly and silently, their eyes fixed on him, piercing him. They filled the room, occupying every square foot except for the small circle of space they left around him and the equipment. And behind them he could see more, filling the hall and waiting room beyond. A sea of faces, all staring at him.

He was frightened now. They were just kids, but there were so damn many of them! A few looked fifteen or so, and one looked to be in her early twenties, but by far most of them appeared to be twelve and under. Some were even toddlers! What sort of sick mind would involve such tiny children in this?

And how did they get in? All the doors were locked.

"Get out of here," he said, forcing his voice into calm, measured tones.

They said nothing, merely continued to stare back at him.

"All right, then. If you won't leave, I will! And when I return -- " He tried to

push by a five-year-old girl in a gypsy costume. Without warning she jabbed her open hand into his abdomen with stunning force, driving him back against the table.

"Who are you?" This time his voice was less calm, his tones less measured.

"You mean you don't recognize us?" a mocking voice said from the crowd.

"I've never seen any of you before today."

"Not true," said another voice. "After our fathers, you're the second most important man in our lives."

This was insane! "I don't know any of you!"

"You should." Another voice -- were they trying to confuse him by talking from different spots in the room?

"Why?"

"Because you killed us."

The absurdity of the statement made him laugh. He straightened from the table and stepped forward. "Okay. That's it. This isn't the least bit funny."

A little boy shoved him back, roughly, violently. His strength was hideous.

"M-my wife will be here s-soon." He was ashamed of the stammer in his voice, but he couldn't help it. "She'll call the police."

"Sergeant Morelli, perhaps?" This voice was more mature than the others -- more womanly. He found her and looked her in the eye. She was the tall one in her early twenties, dressed in a sweater and skirt. He had a sudden crazy thought that maybe she was a young teacher and these were her students on a class trip. But these kids looked like they spanned all grades from pre-school to junior high.

"Who are you?"

"I don't have a name," she said, facing him squarely. "Very few of us do. But this one does." She indicated a little girl at her side, a toddler made up like a hobo in raggedy clothes with burnt cork rubbed on her face for a beard. An Emmett Kelly dwarf. "Here, Laura," she said to the child as she urged her forward. "Show Dr. Cantrell what you looked like last time he saw you."

Laura stepped up to him. Behind the makeup he could see that she was a

beautiful child with short dark hair, a pudgy face, and big brown eyes. She held her bucket out to him.

"She was eleven weeks old," the woman said, "three inches long, and weighed fourteen grams when you ripped her from her mother's uterus. She was no match for you and your suction tube."

Blood and tissue swirled in the bottom of her bucket.

"You don't expect me to buy this, do you?"

"I don't care what you buy, Doctor. But this is Sandra Morelli's child -- or at least what her child would look like now if she'd been allowed to be born. But she wasn't born. Her mother had names all picked out -- Adam for a boy, Laura for a girl -- but her grandfather bullied her mother into an abortion and you were oh-so-willing to see that there were no problems along the way."

"This is absurd!" he said.

"Really?" the woman said. "Then go ahead and call Sergeant Morelli. Maybe he'd like to drive down and meet his granddaughter. The one you killed."

"I killed no one!" he shouted. "No one\ Abortion has been legal since 1974! Absolutely legal! And besides -- she wasn't really alive!"

What's the matter with me? he asked himself. I'm talking to them as if I believe them!

"Oh, yes," the woman said. "I forgot. Some political appointees decided that we weren't people and that was that. Pretty much like what happened to East European Jews back in World War II. We're not even afforded the grace of being called embryos or fetuses. We're known as 'products of conception.' What a neat, dehumanizing little phrase. So much easier to scrape the 'products of conception' into a bucket than a person."

"I've had just about enough of this!" he said.

"So?" a young belligerent voice said. "What're y'gonna do?"

He knew he was going to do nothing. He didn't want to have another primary-grade kid shove him back against the table again. No kid that size should be that strong. It wasn't natural.

"You can't hold me responsible!" he said. "They came to me, asking for help. They were pregnant and they didn't want to be. My God! I didn't make them

pregnant!"

Another voice: "No, but you sure gave them a convenient solution!"

"So blame your mothers! They're the ones who spread their legs and didn't want to take responsibility for it! How about them!"

"They are not absolved," the woman said. "They shirked their responsibilities to us, but the vast majority of them are each responsible for only one of us. You, Dr. Cantrell, are responsible for all of us. Most of them were scared teenagers, like Laura's mother, who were bullied and badgered into 'terminating' us. Others were too afraid of what their parents would say so they snuck off to women's medical centers like this and lied about their age and put us out of their misery."

"Not all of them, sweetheart!" he said. He was beginning to feel he was on firmer ground now. "Many a time I've done three or four on the same woman! Don't tell me they were poor, scared teenagers. Abortion was their idea of birth control!"

"We know," a number of voices chorused, and something in their tone made him shiver. "We'll see them later."

"The point is," the woman said, "that you were always there, always ready with a gentle smile, a helpful hand, an easy solution, a simple way to get them off the hook by getting rid of us. And a bill, of course."

"If it hadn't been me, it would have been someone else!"

"You can't dilute your own blame. Or your own responsibility," said a voice from behind his chair. "Plenty of doctors refuse to do abortions."

"If you were one of those," said another from his left, "we wouldn't be here tonight."

"The law lets me do it. The Supreme Court. So don't blame me. Blame those Supreme Court justices."

"That's politics. We don't care about politics."

"But I believe in a woman's right to control her own life, to make decisions about her own body!"

"We don't care what you believe. Do you think the beliefs of a terrorist matter to the victims of his bombs? Don't you understand? This is personal!"

A little girl's voice said, "I could have been adopted, you know. I would've made someone a good kid. But I never had the chance!"

They all began shouting at once, about never getting Christmas gifts or birthday presents or hugs or tucked in at night or playing with matches or playing catch or playing house or even playing doctor --

It seemed to go on endlessly. Finally the woman held up her bucket. "All their possibilities ended in here."

"Wait a goddamn minute!" he said. He had just discovered a significant flaw in their little show. "Only a few of them ended up in buckets! If you were up on your facts, you'd know that no one uses those old D and C buckets for abortions anymore." He pointed to the glass trap on the Zarick suction extractor. "This is where the products of conception wind up."

The woman stepped forward with her bucket. "They carry this in honor of me. I have the dubious distinction of being your first victim."

"You're not my victims!" he shouted. "The law -- "

She spat in his face. Shocked and humiliated, Cantrell wiped away the saliva with his shirtsleeve and pressed himself back against the table. The rage in her face was utterly terrifying.

"The law!" she hissed. "Don't speak of legalities to me! Look at me! I'd be twenty-two now and this is how I'd look if you hadn't murdered me. Do a little subtraction, Doctor: 1974 was a lot less than twenty-two years ago. I'm Ellen Benedict's daughter -- or at least I would have been if you hadn't agreed to do that D and C on her when she couldn't find a way to explain her pregnancy to her impotent husband!"

Ellen Benedict! God! How did they know about Ellen Benedict? Even he had forgotten about her!

The woman stepped forward and grabbed his wrist. He was helpless against her strength as she pressed his hand over her left breast. He might have found the softness beneath her sweater exciting under different circumstances, but now it elicited only dread.

"Feel my heart beating? It was beating when your curette ripped me to pieces. I was only four weeks old. And I'm not the only one here you killed before 1974 -- I was just your first. So you can't get off the hook by naming the Supreme Court as an accomplice. And even if we allowed you that cop-out, other things

you've done since '74 are utterly abominable!" She looked around and pointed into the crowd. "There's one! Come here, honey, and show your bucket to the doctor."

A five- or six-year-old boy came forward. He had blond bangs and the biggest, saddest blue eyes the doctor had ever seen. The boy held out his bucket.

Cantrell covered his face with his hands. "I don't want to see!"

Suddenly he felt his hands yanked downward with numbing force and found the woman's face scant inches from his own.

"Look, damn you! You've seen it before!"

He looked into the upheld bucket. A fully formed male fetus lay curled in the blood, its blue eyes open, its head turned at an unnatural angle.

"This is Rachel Walraven's baby as you last saw him."

The Walraven baby! Oh, God, not that one! How could they know?

"What you see is how he'd look now if you hadn't broken his neck after the abortifacient you gave his mother made her uterus dump him out."

"He couldn't have survived!" he shouted. He could hear the hysteria edging into his voice. "He was previable! Too immature to survive! The best neonatal ICU in the world couldn't have saved him!"

"Then why'd you break my neck?" the little boy asked.

Cantrell could only sob -- a single harsh sound that seemed to rip itself from the tissues inside his chest and burst free into the air. What could he say? How could he tell them that he had miscalculated the length of gestation and that no one had been more shocked than he at the size of the infant that had dropped into his gloved hands? And then it had opened its eyes and stared at him and my God it seemed to be trying to breathe! He'd done late terminations before where the fetus had squirmed around awhile in the bucket before finally dying, but this one -- !

Christ! he remembered thinking, what if the damn thing lets out a cry? He'd get sued by the patient and be the laughing stock of the staff. Poor Ed Cantrell -- can't tell the difference between an abortion and a delivery! He'd look like a jerk!

So he did the only thing he could do. He gave its neck a sharp twist as he lowered it into the bucket. The neck didn't even crack when he broke it.

"Why have you come to me?" he said.

"Answer us first," a child's voice said. "Why do you do it? You don't need the money. Why do you kill us?"

"I told you! I believe in every woman's right to -- "

They began to boo him, drowning him out. Then the boos changed to a chant: "Why? Why? Why? Why?"

"Stop that! Listen to me! I told you why!"

But still they chanted, sounding like a crowd at a football game: "Why? Why? Why? Why?"

Finally he could stand no more. He raised his fists and screamed. "All right! Because I can! Is that what you want to hear? I do it because I can!"

The room was suddenly dead silent.

The answer startled him. He had never asked himself why before. "Because I can," he said softly.

"Yes," the woman said with equal softness. "The ultimate power."

He suddenly felt very old, very tired. "What do you want of me?"

No one answered.

"Why have you come?"

They all spoke as one: "Because today, this Halloween, this night... we can."

"And we don't want this place to open," the woman said.

So that was it. They wanted to kill the women's center before it got started -- abort it, so to speak. He almost smiled at the pun. He looked at their faces, their staring eyes. They mean business, he thought. And he knew they wouldn't take no for an answer.

Well, this was no time to stand on principle. Promise them anything, and then get the hell out of here to safety.

"Okay," he said, in what he hoped was a meek voice. "You've convinced me. I'll turn this into a general medical center. No abortions. Just family practice for the community."

They watched him silently. Finally a voice said, "He's lying."

The woman nodded. "I know." She turned to the children. "Do it," she said.

Pure chaos erupted as the children went wild. They were like a berserk mob, surging in all directions. But silent. So silent.

Cantrell felt himself shoved aside as the children tore into the procedure table and the Zarick extractor. The table was ripped from the floor and all its upholstery shredded. Its sections were torn free and hurled against the walls with such force that they punctured through the plasterboard.

The rage in the children's eyes seemed to leak out into the room, filling it, thickening the air like an onrushing storm, making his skin ripple with fear at its ferocity.

As he saw the Zarick start to topple, he forced himself forward to try to save it but was casually slammed against the wall with stunning force. In a semi-daze, he watched the Zarick raised into the air; he ducked flying glass as it was slammed onto the floor, not just once, but over and over until it was nothing more than a twisted wreck of wire, plastic hose, and ruptured circuitry.

And from down the hall he could hear similar carnage in the other procedure rooms. Finally the noise stopped and the room was packed with children again.

He began to weep. He hated himself for it, but he couldn't help it. He just broke down and cried in front of them. He was frightened. And all the money, all the plans... destroyed.

He pulled himself together and stood up straight. He would rebuild. All this destruction was covered by insurance. He would blame it on vandalism, collect his money, and have the place brand-new inside of a month. These vicious little bastards weren't going to stop him.

But he couldn't let them know that.

"Get out, all of you," he said softly. "You've had your fun. You've ruined me. Now leave me alone."

"We'll leave you alone," said the woman who would have been Ellen Benedict's child. "But not yet."

Suddenly they began to empty their buckets on him, hurling the contents at him in a continuous wave, turning the air red with flying blood and tissue, engulfing him from all sides, choking him, clogging his mouth and nostrils.

And then they reached for him...

Erica knocked on the front door of the center for the third time and still got no answer.

Now where can he be? she thought as she walked around to the private entrance. She tried the door and found it unlocked. She pushed in but stopped on the threshold.

The waiting room was lit and looked normal enough.

"Ed?" she called, but he didn't answer. Odd. His car was out front. She was supposed to meet him here at five. She had taken a cab from the house -- after all, she didn't want Ginger dropping her off here; there would be too many questions.

This was beginning to make her uneasy.

She glanced down the hallway. It was dark and quiet.

Almost quiet.

She heard tiny little scraping noises, tiny movements, so soft that she would have missed them if there had been any other sound in the building. The sounds seemed to come from the first procedure room. She stepped up to the door and listened to the dark. Yes, they were definitely coming from in there.

She flipped on the light... and felt her knees buckle.

The room was red -- the walls, the ceiling, the remnants of the shattered fixtures, all dripping with red. The clots and the coppery odor that saturated the air left no doubt in Erica's reeling mind that she was looking at blood. But on the floor -- the blood-puddled linoleum was littered with countless shiny, silvery buckets. The little rustling sounds were coming from them. She saw something that looked like hair in a nearby bucket and took a staggering step over to see what was inside.

It was Edward's head, floating in a pool of blood, his eyes wide and mad, looking at her. She wanted to scream but the air clogged in her throat as she saw Ed's lips begin to move. They were forming words but there was no sound, for there were no lungs to push air through his larynx. Yet still his lips kept moving in what seemed to be silent pleas. But pleas for what?

And then he opened his mouth wide and screamed -- silently.

The Pit-Yakker

by Brian Lumley

Born in Harden, Durham on December 2, 1937, Brian Lumley began selling short fiction in the late 1960s, and throughout the 1970s he was chiefly known for a series of books based on the Cthulhu Mythos of H.P. Lovecraft: The Caller of the Black, The Burrowers Beneath, Beneath the Moors, The Transition of Titus Crow, and others. While Lumley still likes to muck about with the Cthulhu Mythos, during the 1980s he concentrated on massive novels of contemporary horror, most notably his Psychomech and Necroscope sagas. Lumley's latest novels include The House of Doors and Necroscope IV: Deadspeak. He has just completed the fifth and final Necroscope novel, Deadspawn, and is now putting together two collections of his short stories, "to be titled Fruiting Bodies & Other Fungi, and (some other silly title)." Tor Books will be bringing out Psychomech I and II as a single volume, to be followed by Psychamok.

Retired from the army after twenty-two years, Brian Lumley now lives with his wife, Dorothy, in Devon. Like "Fruiting Bodies" in last year's Year's Best Horror, "The Pit-Yakker" makes strong and effective use of the sort of English locales that won't be included in your tour package.

When I was sixteen, my father used to say to me: "Watch what you're doing with the girls; you're an idiot to smoke, for it's expensive and unhealthy; stay away from Raymond Maddison!" My mother had died two years earlier, so he'd taken over her share of the nagging, too.

The girls? Watch what I was doing? At sixteen I barely knew what I was doing! I knew what I wanted to do, but the how of it was a different matter entirely. Cigarettes? I enjoyed them; at the five-a-day stage, they still gave me that occasionally sweet taste and made my head spin. Raymond Maddison? I had gone to school with him, and because he lived so close to us we'd used to walk home together. But his mother was a little weak-minded, his older brother had been put away for molesting or something, and Raymond himself was thick as two short planks, hulking and unlovely, and a very shadowy character in general. Or at least he gave that impression.

Girls didn't like him: he smelled of bread and dripping and didn't clean his teeth too well, and for two years now he'd been wearing the same jacket and trousers, which had grown pretty tight on him. His short hair and little piggy eyes made him look bristly, and there was that looseness about his lips, which you find

in certain idiots. If you were told that ladies' underwear was disappearing from the washing-lines, you'd perhaps think of Raymond. If someone was jumping out on small girls at dusk and shouting boo!, he was the one who'd spring to mind. If the little-boy-up-the-road's kitten got strangled...

Not that that sort of thing happened a lot in Harden, for it didn't. Up there on the northeast coast in those days, the Bobbies on the beat were still Bobbies, unhampered by modern "ethics" and other humane restrictions. Catch a kid drawing red, hairy, diamond-shaped designs on the school wall, and wallop!, he'd get a clout round the earhole, dragged off home to his parents, and doubtless another wallop. Also, in the schools, the cane was still in force. Young people were still being "brought up," were made or at least encouraged to grow up straight and strong, and not allowed to bolt and run wild. Most of them, anyway. But it wasn't easy, not in that environment.

Harden lay well outside the fringes of "Geordie-land" -- Newcastle and environs -- but real outsiders termed us all Geordies anyway. It was the way we spoke; our near-Geordie accents leaped between soft and harsh as readily as the Welsh tongue soars up and down the scales; a dialect which at once identified us as "pit-yakkers," grimy-black shambling colliers, coal-miners. The fact that my father was a Harden greengrocer made no difference: I came from the colliery and so was a pit-yakker. I was an apprentice woodcutting machinist in Hartlepool? -- so what? My collar was grimy, wasn't it? With coal dust? And no matter how much I tried to disguise it I had that accent, didn't I? Pit-yakker!

But at sixteen I was escaping from the image. One must, or sex remains forever a mystery. The girls -- the better girls, anyway -- in the big towns, even in Harden, Easingham, Blackhill and the other colliery villages, weren't much impressed by or interested in pit-yakkers. Which must have left Raymond Maddison in an entirely hopeless position. Everything about him literally shrieked of his origin, made worse by the fact that his father, a miner, was already grooming Raymond for the mine, too. You think I have a down on them, the colliers? No, for they were the salt of the earth. They still are. I merely give you the background.

As for my own opinion of Raymond: I thought I knew him and didn't for a moment consider him a bad sort. He loved John Wayne like I did, and liked to think of himself as a tough egg, as I did. But Nature and the world in general hadn't been so kind to him, and being a bit of a dunce didn't help much either. He was like a big scruffy dog who sits at the corner of the street grinning at everyone going by and wagging his tail, whom nobody ever pats for fear of fleas or mange or whatever, and who you're sure pees on the front wheel of your car every time you

park it there. He probably doesn't, but somebody has to take the blame. That was how I saw Raymond.

So I was sixteen and some months, and Raymond Maddison about the same, and it was a Saturday in July. Normally when we met we'd pass the time of day. Just a few words: what was on at the cinema (in Harden there were two of them, the Ritz and the Empress -- for this was before Bingo closed most of them down), when was the next dance at the Old Victoria Hall, how many pints we'd downed last Friday at the British Legion. Dancing, drinking, smoking, and girls: it was a time of experimentation. Life had many flavors other than those that wafted out from the pit and the coke-ovens. On this Saturday, however, he was the last person I wanted to see, and the very last I wanted to be seen with.

I was waiting for Moira, sitting on the recreation ground wall where the stumps of the old iron railings showed through, which they'd taken away thirteen years earlier for the war effort and never replaced. I had been a baby then but it was one of the memories I had: of the men in the helmets with the glass faceplates cutting down all the iron things to melt for the war. It had left only the low wall, which was ideal to sit on. In the summer the flat-capped miners would sit there to watch the kids flying kites in the recreation ground or playing on the swings, or just to sit and talk. There was a group of old-timers there that Saturday, too, all looking out across the dark, fuming colliery toward the sea; so when I saw Raymond hunching my way with his hands in his pockets, I turned and looked in the same direction, hoping he wouldn't notice me. But he already had.

"Hi, Joshua!" he said in his mumbling fashion, touching my arm. I don't know why I was christened Joshua: I wasn't Jewish or a Catholic or anything. I do know why; my father told me his father had been called Joshua, so that was it. Usually they called me Josh, which I liked because it sounded like a wild-western name. I could imagine John Wayne being called Josh. But Raymond occasionally forgot and called me Joshua.

"Hello, Raymond!" I said. I usually called him Ray, but if he noticed the difference he didn't say anything.

"Game of snooker?" It was an invitation.

"No," I shook my head. "I'm, er, waiting for someone."

"Who?"

"Mind your own business."

"Girl?" he said. "Moira? Saw you with her at the Ritz. Back row."

"Look, Ray, I -- "

"It's OK," he said, sitting down beside me on the wall. "We're jus' talking. I can go any time."

I groaned inside. He was bound to follow us. He did stupid things like that. I decided to make the best of it, glanced at him. "So, what are you doing? Have you found a job yet?"

He pulled a face. "Naw."

"Are you going to?"

"Pit. Next spring. My dad says."

"Uh-huh," I nodded. "Plenty of work there." I looked along the wall past the groundkeeper's house. That's the way Moira would come.

"Hey, look!" said Raymond. He took out a brand new Swiss Army penknife and handed it over for my inspection. As my eyes widened he beamed. "Beauty, eh?"

And it was. "Where'd you get it?" I asked him, opening it up. It was fitted with every sort of blade and attachment you could imagine. Three or four years earlier I would have loved a knife like that. But right now I couldn't see why I'd need it. OK for woodcarving or the Boy Scouts, or even the Boys' Brigade, but I'd left all that stuff behind. And anyway, the machines I was learning to use in my trade paled this thing to insignificance and made it look like a very primitive toy. Like a rasp beside a circular saw. I couldn't see why Raymond would want it either.

"Saved up for it," he said. "See, a saw. Two saws! One for metal, one for wood. Knives -- careful! -- sharp. Gouge -- "

"That's an auger," I said, "not a gouge. But... this one's a gouge, right enough. Look," and I eased the tool from its housing to show him.

"Corkscrew," he went on. "Scissors, file, hook..."

"Hook?"

"For hooking things. Magnetic. You can pick up screws."

"It's a good knife," I told him, giving it back. "How do you use it?"

"I haven't," he said, " -- yet."

I was getting desperate. "Ray, do me a favor. Look, I have to stay here and wait for her. And I'm short of cigs." I forked out a florin. "Bring me a packet, will you? Twenty? And I'll give you a few."

He took the coin. "You'll be here?"

I nodded, lying without saying anything. I had an unopened packet of twenty in my pocket. He said no more but loped off across the road, disappearing into one of the back streets leading to Harden's main road and shopping area. I let him get out of sight, then set off briskly past the groundskeeper's house, heading north.

Now, I know I've stated that in my opinion he was OK; but even so, still I knew he wasn't to be trusted. He just might follow us, if he could -- out of curiosity, perversity, don't ask me. You just couldn't be sure what he was thinking, that's all. And I didn't want him peeping on us.

It dawns on me now that in his "innocence" Raymond was anything but innocent. There are two sides to each of us, and in someone like him, a little lacking in basic understanding... well, who is to say that the dark side shouldn't on occasion be just a shade darker? For illustration, there'd been that time when we were, oh, nine or ten years old? I had two white mice who lived in their box in the garden shed. They had their own swimming pool, too, made out of an old baking tray just two and a half inches deep. I'd trained them to swim to a floating tin lid for bits of bacon rind.

One day, playing with Raymond and the mice in the garden, I'd been called indoors about something or other. I was only inside a moment or two, but when I came back out he'd gone. Looking over the garden wall and down the street, I'd seen him tip-toeing off into the distance! A great hulk like him, slinking off like a cartoon cat!

Then I'd shrugged and returned to my game -- and just in time. The tin lid raft was upside-down, with Peter and Pan trapped underneath, paddling for all they were worth to keep their snouts up in the air trapped under there with them. It was only a small thing, I suppose, but it had given me bad dreams for a long time. So... instead of the hard nut I considered myself, maybe I was just a big softy after all. In some things.

But... did Raymond do it deliberately or was it an accident? And if the latter,

then why was he slinking off like that? If he had tried to drown them, why? Jealousy? Something I had which he didn't have? Or sheer, downright nastiness? When I'd later tackled him about it, he'd just said: "Eh? Eh?" and looked dumb. That's the way it was with him. I could never figure out what went on in there.

Moira lived down by the high colliery wall, beyond which stood vast cones of coal, piled there, waiting to fuel the coke ovens. And as a backdrop to these black foothills, the wheelhouse towers rising like sooty sentinels, coming into view as I hurried through the grimy sunlit streets; a colliery in the summer seems strangely opposed to itself. In one of the towers a massive spoked wheel was spinning even now, raising or lowering a cage in its claustrophobic shaft. Miners, some still in their "pit black," even wearing their helmets and lamps, drew deep on cigarettes as they came away from the place. My father would have said: "As if their lungs aren't suffering enough already!"

I knew the exact route Moira would take from her gritty colliery street house to the recreation ground, but at each junction in its turn I scanned the streets this way and that, making sure I didn't miss her. By now Raymond would have brought the cigarettes and be on his way back to the wall.

"Hello, Josh!" she said, breathlessly surprised -- almost as if she hadn't expected to see me today -- appearing like a ray of extra bright sunlight from behind the freshly creosoted fencing of garden allotments. She stood back and looked me up and down. "So, you're all impatient to see me, eh? Or... maybe I was late?" She looked at me anxiously.

I had been hurrying and so was breathing heavily. I smiled, wiped my forehead, said: "It's... just that there was someone I knew back there, at the recreation ground, and -- "

" -- You didn't want to be seen with me?" She frowned. She was mocking me, but I didn't know it.

"No, not that," I hurriedly denied it, "but -- "

And then she laughed and I knew she'd been teasing. "It's all right, Josh," she said. "I understand." She linked my arm. "Where are we going?"

"Walking," I said, turning her into the maze of allotments, trying to control my breathing, my heartbeat.

"I know that]" she said. "But where?"

"Down to the beach, and up again in Blackhill?"

"The beach is very dirty. Not very kind to good clothes." She was wearing a short blue skirt, white blouse, and a smart white jacket across her arm.

"The beach banks, then," I gulped. "And along the cliff paths to Easingham."

"You only want to get me where it's lonely," she said, but with a smile. "All right, then." And a moment later, "May I have a cigarette?"

I brought out my fresh pack and started to open it, but looking nervously around she said: "Not just yet. When we're farther into the allotments." She was six months my junior and lived close by; if someone saw her smoking it was likely to be reported to her father. But a few minutes later we shared a cigarette and she kissed me, blowing smoke into my mouth. I wondered where she'd learned to do that. Also, it took me by surprise -- the kiss, I mean. She was impulsive like that.

In retrospect, I suppose Moira was my first love. And they say you never forget the first one. Well, they mean you never forget the first time -- but I think your first love is the same, even if there's nothing physical. But she was the first one who'd kept me awake at night thinking of her, the first one who made me ache.

She was maybe five feet six or seven, had a heart-shaped face, huge dark come-to-bed eyes which I suspected and hoped hadn't yet kept their promise, a mouth maybe a fraction too wide, so that her face seemed to break open when she laughed, and hair that bounced on her shoulders entirely of its own accord. They didn't have stuff to make it bounce in those days.

Her figure was fully formed and she looked wonderful in a bathing costume, and her legs were long and tapering. Also, I had a thing about teeth, and Moira's were perfect and very, very white. Since meeting her the first time I'd scrubbed the inside of my mouth and my gums raw trying to match the whiteness of her teeth.

Since meeting her...

That had been, oh, maybe three months ago. I mean, I'd always known her, or known of her. You can't live all your life in a small colliery village and not know everyone, at least by sight. But when she'd left school and got her first job at a salon in Hartlepool, and we'd started catching the same bus in the morning, that had opened it up for us.

After that there'd been a lot of talk, then the cinema, eventually the beach at Seaton, which the debris from the pits hadn't ruined yet, and now we were "going together." It hadn't meant much to me before, that phrase, "going together," but now I understood it. We went places together, and we went well together. I thought

so, anyway.

The garden allotments started properly at the end of the colliery wall and sprawled over many acres along the coast road on the northern extreme of the village. The access paths, which divided them, were dusty, mazy, meandering. But behind the fences people were at work, and they came to and fro along the paths, so that it wasn't really private there. I had returned Moira's kiss, and in several quieter places had tried to draw her closer once or twice.

Invariably she held me at arm's length, saying: "Not here!" And her nervousness made me nervous, too, so that I'd look here and there all about, to make sure we were unobserved. And it was at such a time, glancing back the way we'd come, that I thought I saw a face hastily snatched back around the corner of a fence. The thought didn't occur to me that it might be Raymond. By now I'd quite forgotten about him.

Where the allotments ended the open fields began, gradually declining to a dene and a stream that ran down to the sea. A second cigarette had been smoked down to its tip and discarded by the time we crossed the fields along a hedgerow, and we'd fallen silent where we strolled through the long summer grass. But I was aware of my arm, linked with hers, and hugged close against her right breast. And that was a thought which made me dizzy, for through a heady half-hour I had actually held that breast in my hand, had known how warm it was, with its little hard tip that felt rough against the parent softness.

Oh, the back row love-seats in the local cinema were worthy of an award; whoever designed them deserves an accolade from all the world's lovers. Two people on a single, softly upholstered seat, thigh-to-thigh and hip-to-hip, with no ghastly armrest divider, no obstruction to the slow, breathless, tender and timid first invasion.

In the dark with only the cinema's wall behind us, and the smoky beam from the projector turning all else to pitch, I was sure she wasn't aware of my progress with the top button of her blouse, and I considered myself incredibly fortunate to be able to disguise my fumblings with the second of those small obstacles. But after a while, when for all my efforts it appeared I'd get no further and my frustration was mounting as the tingling seconds ticked by, then she'd gently taken my hand away and effortlessly completed the job for me. She had known -- which, while it took something of the edge off my triumph, nevertheless increased the frisson to new and previously unexplored heights.

Was I innocent? I don't know. Others, younger by a year, had said they knew

everything there was to know. Everything! That was a thought.

But in opening that button and making way for my hand, Moira had invited me in, as it were; cuddled up together there in the back row, my hand had molded itself to the shape of her breast and learned every contour better than any actor ever memorized his lines. Even now, a week later, I could form my hand into a cup and feel her flesh filling it again. And desired to feel her filling it again.

Where the hedgerow met a fence at right-angles, we crossed a stile; I was across first and helped Moira down. While I held one hand to steady her, she hitched her short skirt a little to step down from the stile's high platform. It was funny, but I found Moira's legs more fascinating in that skirt than in her bathing costume. And I'd started to notice the heat of my ears -- that they were hot quite apart from the heat of the sun, with a sort of internal burning -- as we more nearly approached our destination. My destination, anyway, where if her feelings matched mine she'd succumb a little more to my seductions.

As we left the stile to take the path down into the dene and toward the sea cliffs, I glanced back the way we'd come. I don't know why. It was just that I had a feeling. And back there, across the fields, but hurrying, I thought... a figure. Raymond? If it was, and if he were to bother us today of all days... I promised myself he'd pay for it with a bloody nose. But on the other hand it could be anybody. Saying nothing of it to Moira, I hurried her through the dene. Cool under the trees, where the sunlight dappled the rough cobbled path, she said:

"What on earth's the hurry, Josh? Are you that eager?"

The way I took her up in my arms and kissed her till I reeled must have answered her question for me; but there were voices here and there along the path, and the place echoed like a tunnel. No, I knew where I wanted to take her.

Toward the bottom of the dene, where it narrowed to a bottleneck of woods and water scooped through the beach banks and tunneled toward the sea, we turned north across an old wooden bridge over the scummy stream and began climbing toward the cliff paths, open fields, and sand holes that lay between us and Easingham Colliery. Up there, in the long grasses of those summer fields, we could be quite alone and Moira would let me make love to her, I hoped. She'd hinted as much, anyway, the last time I walked her home.

Toiling steeply up an earth track, where white sand spilled down from sand holes up ahead, we looked down on the beach -- or what had been a beach before the pit-yakkers came -- and remembered a time when it was almost completely

white from the banks and cliffs to the sea. On a palmy summer day like this the sea should be blue, but it was gray. Its waves broke in a gray froth of scum on a black shore that looked ravaged by cancer -- the cancer of the pits.

The landscape down there could be that of an alien planet: the black beach scarred by streamlets of dully glinting slurry gurgling seaward; concentric tidemarks of congealed froth, with the sick, wallowing sea seeming eager to escape from its own vomit; a dozen sea-coal lorries scattered here and there like ticks on a carcass, their crews shoveling pebble-sized nuggets of the wet, filthy black gold in through open tail-gates, while other vehicles trundled like lice over the rotting black corpse of a moonscape. Sucked up by the sun, gray mists wreathed the whole scene.

"It's worse than I remembered it," I said. "And you were right: we couldn't have walked down there, not even along the foot of the banks. It's just too filthy! And to think: all of that was pure white sand just, oh -- "

" -- Ten years ago?" she said. "Well, maybe not pure white, but it was still a nice beach then, anyway. Yes, I remember. I've seen that beach full of people, the sea bobbing with their heads. My father used to swim there, with me on his chest! I remember it. I can remember things from all the way back to when I was a baby. It's a shame they've done this to it."

"It's actually unsafe," I told her. "There are places they've flagged, where they've put up warning notices. Quicksands of slag and slop and slurry -- gritty black sludge from the pits. And just look at that skyline!"

South lay the colliery at Harden, the perimeter of its works coming close to the banks where they rolled down to the sea, with half-a-dozen of its black spider legs straddling out farther yet. These were the aerial trip-dumpers: conveyor-belts or ski-lifts of slag, endlessly swaying to the rim and tripped there, to tip the refuse of the coke-ovens down onto the smoking wasteland of foreshore; and these were, directly, the culprits of all this desolation. Twenty-four hours a day for fifty years they'd crawled on their high cables, between their spindly towers, great buckets of muck depositing the pus of the earth to corrode a coast. And behind this lower intestine of the works lay the greater pulsating mass of the spider itself: the pit, with its wheel-towers and soaring black chimneys, its mastaba cooling towers and mausoleum coke-ovens. Yellow smoke, gray and black smoke, belching continuously into the blue sky -- or into a sky which looked blue but was in fact polluted, as any rainy day would testify, when white washing on garden lines would turn a streaky gray with the first patter of raindrops.

On the southern horizon, Blackhill was a spiky smudge under a gray haze; north, but closer, Easingham was the same. Viewed from this same position at night, the glow of the coke-ovens, the flare-up and gouting orange steam when white hot coke was hosed down, would turn the entire region into a scene straight from Hell! Satanic mills? They have nothing on a nest of well-established coal mines by the sea....

We reached the top of the banks and passed warning notices telling how from here on they rolled down to sheer cliffs. When I'd been a child, miners used to clamber down the banks to the cliff-edge, hammer stakes into the earth and lower themselves on ropes with baskets to collect gull eggs. Inland, however, the land was flat, where deep grass pasture roved wild all the way from here to the coast road. There were a few farms, but that was all.

We walked half a mile along the cliff path until the fields began to be fenced; where a hedgerow inside the fence, there split the first true field. I paused and turned to Moira. We hadn't seen anyone, hadn't spoken for some time but I suppose her heart, like mine, had been speeding up a little. Not from our efforts, for walking here was easy.

"We can climb the fence, cut along the hedgerow," I suggested, a little breathlessly.

"Why?" Her eyes were wide, naive and yet questioning.

I shrugged. "A... shortcut to the main road?" But I'd made it a question, and I knew I shouldn't leave the initiative to her. Gathering my courage, I added: "Also, we'll -- "

" -- Find a bit of privacy?" Her face was flushed.

I climbed the rough three-bar fence; she followed my example and I helped her down, and knew she'd seen where I could hardly help looking. But she didn't seem to mind. We stayed close to the hedgerow, which was punctuated every twenty-five paces or so with great oaks, and struck inland. It was only when we were away from the fence that I remembered, just before jumping down, that I'd paused a second to scan the land about -- and how for a moment I thought I'd seen someone back along the path. Raymond, I wondered? But in any case, he should lose our trail now.

After some two hundred yards there was a lone elder tree growing in the field a little way apart from the hedge, its branches shading the lush grass underneath. I led Moira away from the hedge and into the shade of the elder, and

she came unresisting. And there I spread my jacket for her to sit on, and for a minute or two we just sprawled. The grass hid us almost completely in our first private place. Seated, we could just see the topmost twigs of the hedgerow, and of course the bole and spreading canopy of the nearest oak.

Now, I don't intend to go into details. Anyone who was ever young, alone with his girl, will know the details anyway. Let it suffice to say that there were things I wanted, some of which she was willing to give. And some she wasn't. "No," she said. And more positively: "No!" when I persisted. But she panted and moaned a little all the same, and her voice was almost desperate, suggesting: "But I can do it for you this way, if you like." Ah, but her hands set me on fire! I burned for her, and she felt the strength of the flame rising in me. "Josh, no!" she said again. "What if... if..."

She looked away from me, froze for a moment -- and her mouth fell open. She drew air hissingly and expelled it in a gasp. "Josh!" And without pause she was doing up buttons, scrambling to her feet, brushing away wisps of grass from her skirt and blouse.

"Eh?" I said, astonished. "What is it?"

"He saw us!" she gasped. "He saw you -- me -- like that!" Her voice shook with a mixture of outrage and fear.

"Who?" I said, mouth dry, looking this way and that and seeing no one. "Where?"

"By the oak tree," she said. "Half-way up it. A face, peering out from behind. Someone was watching us."

Someone? Only one someone it could possibly be! But be sure that when I was done with him he'd never peep on anyone again! Flushed and furious I sprinted through the grass for the oak tree. The hedge hid a rotting fence; I went over, through it, came to a panting halt in fragments of brown, broken timber. No sign of anyone. You could hide an army in that long grass. But the fence where it was nailed to the oak bore the scuffmarks of booted feet, and the tree's bark was freshly bruised some six feet up the bole.

"You... dog!" I growled to myself. "God, but I'll get you, Raymond Maddison!"

"Josh!" I heard Moira on the other side of the "hedge. "Josh, I'm so -- ashamed!"

"What?" I called out. "Of what? He won't dare say anything -- whoever he is. There are laws against -- ". But she was no longer there. Forcing myself through soft wooden jaws and freeing myself from the tangle of the hedge, I saw her hurrying back the way we'd come. "Moira!" I called, but she was already halfway to the three-bar fence. "Moira!" I called again, and then ran after her. By the time I reached the fence she'd climbed it and was starting back along the path.

I finally caught up with her, took her arm. "Moira, we can find some other place. I mean, just because -- "

She shook me off, turned on me. "Is that all you want, Josh Peters?" Her face was angry now, eyes flashing. "Well if it is, there are plenty of other girls in Harden who'll be more than happy to... to..."

"Moira, I -- " I shook my head. It wasn't like that. We were going together.

"I thought you liked me\" she snapped. "The real me!"

My jaw fell open. Why was she talking to me like this? She knew I liked -- more than liked -- the real Moira. She was the real Moira! It was a tiff, brought on by excitement, fear, frustration; we'd never before had to deal with anything like this, and we didn't know how. Hers heightened my emotions, and now my pride took over. I thrust my jaw out, turned on my heel and strode rapidly away from her.

"If that's what you think of me," I called back, " -- if that's as much as you think of me -- then maybe this is for the best..."

"Josh?" I heard her small voice behind me. But I didn't answer, didn't look back.

Furious, I hurried, almost trotted back the way we'd come: along the cliff path, scrambling steeply down through the grass-rimmed, crumbling sand pits to the dene. But at the bottom I deliberately turned left and headed for the beach. Dirty? Oh, the beach would be dirty -- sufficiently dirty so that she surely wouldn't follow me. I didn't want her to. I wanted nothing of her. Oh, I did, I did! -- But I wouldn't admit it, not even to myself, not then. But if she did try to follow me, it would mean... it would mean...

Moira, Moira! Did I love her? Possibly, but I couldn't handle the emotion. So many emotions; and inside I was still on fire from what had nearly been, still aching from the retention of fluids my young body had so desired to be rid of. Raymond? Raymond Maddison? By God, but I'd bloody him! I'd let some of his

damned fluids out!

"Josh!" I seemed to hear Moira's voice from a long way back, but I could have been mistaken. In any case it didn't slow me down. Time and space flashed by in a blur; I was down onto the beach; I walked south under the cliffs on sand that was still sand, however blackened; I trekked grimy sand dunes up and down, kicking at withered tufts of crabgrass which reminded me of the gray and yellow hairs sprouting from the blemishes of old men. Until finally I had burned something of the anger and frustration out of myself.

Then I turned toward the sea, cut a path between the sickly dunes down to the no-man's land of black slag and stinking slurry, and found a place to sit on a rock etched by chemical reaction into an anomalous hump. It was one of a line of rocks I remembered from my childhood, reaching out half a mile to the sea, from which the men had crabbed and cast their lines. But none of that now. Beyond where I sat, only the tips of the lifeless, once limpet- and mussel-festooned rocks stuck up above the slurry; a leaning, blackened signpost warned:

DANGER! QUICKSAND!
Do Not Proceed Beyond This Point.

Quicksand? Quag, certainly, but not sand...

I don't know how long I sat there. The sea was advancing and gray gulls wheeled on high, crying on a rising breeze that blew their plaintive voices inland.

Scummy waves broke in feathers of gray froth less than one hundred yards down the beach. Down what had been a beach before the invasion of the pit-yakkers. It was summer but down here there were no seasons. Steam curled up from the slag and misted a pitted, alien landscape.

I became lulled by the sound of the birds, the hissing throb of foamy waters, and, strangely, from some little distance away, the periodic clatter of an aerial dumper tilting its buckets and hurling more mineral debris down from on high, creating a mound which the advancing ocean would spread out in a new layer to coat and further contaminate the beach.

I sat there glumly, with my chin like lead in my hands and all of these sounds dull on the periphery of my consciousness, and thought nothing in particular and certainly nothing of any importance. From time to time a gull's cry

would sound like Moira's voice, but too shrill, high, frightened, or desperate. She wasn't coming, wouldn't come, and I had lost her. We had lost each other.

I became aware of time trickling by, but again I state: I don't know how long I sat there. An hour? Maybe.

Then something broke through to me. Something other than the voices of the gulls, the waves, the near-distant rain of stony rubble. A new sound? A presence? I looked up, turned my head to scan north along the dead and rotting beach. And I saw him -- though as yet he had not seen me.

My eyes narrowed and I felt my brows come together in a frown. Raymond Maddison. The pit-yakker himself. And this probably as good a place as any, maybe better than most, to teach him a well-deserved lesson. I stood up, and keeping as low a profile as possible made my way round the back of the tarry dunes to where he was standing. In less than two minutes I was there, behind him, creeping up on where he stood wind-blown and almost forlorn-seeming, staring out to sea. And there I paused.

It seemed his large, rounded shoulders were heaving. Was he crying? Catching his breath? Gulping at the warm, reeking air? Had he been running? Searching for me? Following me as earlier he'd followed us? My feelings hardened against him. It was because he wasn't entirely all there that people tolerated him. But I more than suspected he was all there. Not really a dummy, more a scummy.

And I had him trapped. In front of him the rocks receding into pits of black filth, where a second warning notice leaned like a scarecrow on a battlefield, and behind him... only myself behind him. Me and my tightly clenched fists.

Then, as I watched, he took something out of his pocket. His new knife, as I saw now. He stared down at it for a moment, and then drew back his arm as if to hurl it away from him, out into the black wilderness of quag. But he froze like that, with the knife still in his hand, and I saw that his shoulders had stopped shuddering. He became alert; I guessed that he'd sensed I was there, watching him.

He turned his head and saw me, and his eyes opened wide in a pale, slack face. I'd never seen him so pale. Then he fell to one knee, dipped his knife into the slurry at his feet, and commenced wiping at it with a rag of a handkerchief. Caught unawares he was childlike, tending to do meaningless things.

"Raymond," I said, my voice grimmer than I'd intended. "Raymond, I want a word with you!" And he looked for somewhere to run as I advanced on him. But there was nowhere.

"I didn't -- " he suddenly blurted. "I didn't -- "

"But you did!" I was only a few paces away.

"I... I..."

"You followed us, peeped on us, and messed it all up."

And again he seemed to freeze, while his brain turned over what I'd said to him. Lines creased his brow, vanishing as quickly as they'd come. "What?"

"What?!" I shouted, stepping closer still. "You bloody well know what! Now Moira and me, we're finished. And it's your fault."

He backed off into the black mire, which at once covered his boots and the cuffs of his too-short trousers. And there he stood, lifting and lowering his feet, which went glop, glop with each up and down movement. He reminded me of nothing so much as a fly caught on the sticky paper they used at that time. And his mouth kept opening and closing, stupidly, because he had nothing to say and nowhere to run, and he knew I was angry.

Finally he said: "I didn't mean to... follow you. But I -- " And he reached into a pocket and brought out a packet of cigarettes. "Your cigarettes."

I had known that would be his excuse. "Throw them to me, Ray," I said. For I wasn't about to go stepping in there after him. He tossed me the packet but stayed right where he was, "You may as well come on out," I told him, lighting up, "for you know I'm going to settle with you."

"Josh," he said, still mouthing like a fish. "Josh...."

"Yes, Josh, Josh," I told him, nodding. "But you've really done it this time, and we have to have it out."

He still had his knife. He showed it to me, opened the main blade. He took a pace forward out of the slurry and I took a pace back. There was a sick grin on his face. Except... he wasn't threatening me. "For you," he said, snapping the blade shut. "I don't... don't want it no more." He stepped from the quag onto a flat rock and stood there facing me, not quite within arm's reach. He tossed the knife and I automatically caught it. It weighed heavy in my hand where I clenched my knuckles round it.

"A bribe?" I said. "So that I won't tell what you did? How many friends do you have, Ray? And how many left if I tell what a dirty, sneaky, spying -- "

But he was still grinning his sick, nervous grin. "You won't tell," he shook his head. "Not what I seen."

I made a lunging grab for him and the grin slipped from his face. He hopped to a second rock farther out in the liquid slag, teetered there for a moment before finding his balance. And he looked anxiously all about for more stepping-stones, in case I should follow.

There were two or three more rocks, all of them deeper into the coal dust quicksand, but beyond them only a bubbly, oozy black surface streaked with oil and yellow mineral swirls.

Raymond's predicament was a bad one. Not because of me. I would only hit him. Once or twice, depending how long it took to bloody him. But this stuff would murder him. If he fell in. And the black slime was dripping from the bottoms of his trousers, making the surface of his rock slippery. Raymond's balance wasn't much, neither mentally nor physically. He began to slither this way and that, wind-milled his arms in an effort to stay put.

"Ray!" I was alarmed. "Come out of there!"

He leaped, desperately, tried to find purchase on the next rock, slipped! His feet shot up in the air and he came down on his back in the quag. The stuff quivered like thick black porridge and put out slow-motion ripples. He flailed his arms, yelping like a dog, as the lower part of his body started to sink. His trousers ballooned with the air in them, but the stuff's suck was strong. Raymond was going down.

Before I could even start to think straight he was in chest deep, the filth inching higher every second. But he'd stopped yelping and had started thinking. Thinking desperate thoughts. "Josh... Josh!" he gasped.

I stepped forward ankle-deep, got up onto the first rock. I made to jump to the second rock but he stopped me. "No, Josh," he whispered. "Or we'll both go."

"You're sinking," I said, for once as stupid as him.

"Listen," he answered with a gasp. "Up between the dunes, some cable, half-buried. I saw it on my way down here. Tough, 'lectric wire, in the muck. You can pull me out with that."

I remembered. I had seen it, too. Several lengths of discarded cable, buried in the scummy dunes. All my limbs were trembling as I got back to solid ground, setting out up the beach between the dunes. "Josh!" his voice reached out harshly

after me. "Hurry!" And a moment later: "The first bit of wire you see, that'll do it...."

I hurried, ran, raced. But my heart was pounding, the air rasping like sandpaper in my lungs. Fear. But... I couldn't find the cable. Then there was a tall dune, a great heap of black-streaked, slag-crust-ed sand. A lookout place! I went up it, my feet breaking through the crust, letting rivulets of sand cascade, thrusting myself to the top. Now I could get directions, scan the area all about. Over there, between low humps of diseased sand, I could see what might be a cable: a thin, frozen black snake of the stuff.

But beyond the cable I could see something else: colors, anomalous, strewn in a clump of dead crabgrass.

I tumbled down the side of the great dune, ran for the cable, and tore a length free of the sand and muck. I had maybe fifteen, twenty feet of the stuff. Coiling it, I looked back. Raymond was there in the quag, going down black and sticky. But in the other direction -- just over there, no more than a dozen loping paces away, hidden in the crabgrass and low humps of sand -- something blue and white and... and red.

Something about it made my skin prickle. Quickly, I went to see. And I saw...

After a while I heard Raymond's voice over the crying of the gulls. "Josh! Josh\"

I walked back, the cable looped in my lifeless hands, made my way to where he hung crucified in the quag; his arms formed the cross, palms pressing down on the belching surface, his head thrown back and the slop ringing his throat. And I stood looking at him. He saw me; saw the cable in my limp hands, looked into my eyes. And he knew. He knew I wasn't going to let him have the cable.

Instead I gave him back his terrible knife with all its terrible attachments -- which he'd been waiting to use, and which I'd seen no use for -- tossing it so that it landed in front of him and splashed a blob of slime into his right eye.

He pleaded with me for a little while then, but there was no excuse. I sat and smoked, without even remembering lighting my fresh cigarette, until he began to gurgle. The black filth flooded his mouth, nostrils, and the circles of his eyes. He went down, his sputtering mouth forming a ring in the muck, which slowly filled in when he was gone. Big shiny bubbles came bursting to the surface....

When my cigarette went out I began to cry, and crying staggered back up the beach between the dunes. To Moira.

Moira. Something I'd had -- almost -- which he didn't have. Which he could never have, except like this. Jealousy, or just sheer evil? And was I any better than him, now? I didn't know then, and I don't know to this day. He was just a pit-yakker, born for the pit. Him and roe both, I suppose, but I had been lucky enough to escape it.

And he hadn't....

Mr. Sandman

by Scott D. Yost

Quite a few years back, when Gerald W. Page was editor of The Year's Best Horror Stories, he bought stories by Manly Wade Wellman, David Drake, and me -- all three of us living in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, all three of us in the same volume. I made some sort of remark about the weirdness of his choosing three stories from writers in the same small town. Vampirism? A secret cult? Since then it's spread. I think it's something in the water. At any rate, here's a new Chapel Hill writer: Scott D. Yost.

Yost writes: "I was born July 21, 1960 in Greensboro, North Carolina. I received my B.A. from Duke, where I double-majored in economics and philosophy. Currently, I'm finishing up my Ph.D. in philosophy at UNC-Chapel Hill. I'm also near completion on my first novel." Yost's other recent sales include stories in Scrapes, New Blood, Twisted, The Tome, Terror Time Again, Starshore, and Starbright. A stockbroker for two years, he has also done some free-lance financial writing, and he has an article on writing fiction recently published in The Writer.

By the way, this week a clerk at the local sci-fi bookshop sold his first horror novel to NAL.

He was twenty-one years old and tired of the doctors. He wanted to scream: Listen you dumb bastards, the problem isn't that I sleep too much -- the problem is that I never sleep. Never. In fact, on one visit to Greensboro Memorial three years ago, Jeff had shouted something along those lines loud enough for everyone on the floor to hear it, and a nurse, acting on Dr. Saunders's instructions, had to pump a hypodermic full of tranquilizer into Jeff's arm.

But no one ever listened, least of all the doctors. They didn't listen mostly because often -- very often -- he did lie down, close his eyes, and (so he had been told) snore loudly.

Jeff made a promise to himself: after this, no more doctors, no more hospitals. He was a senior in college now and his parents couldn't drag him to clinics any more.

Dr. Saxon, the oldest doctor on this team, walked into the hospital room, never looking up from his clipboard.

"Give it to me straight, Doc," Jeff said smiling, "how long do I have left?"

"Oh, I'd say about fifty years. I can't find one damn thing wrong with you."

"How about calling my parents and telling them that."

"I plan to. But I'm also going to tell them that sleeping twelve hours a day is a sign of severe depression." Dr. Saxon paused a few seconds; his expression was serious as always. "Jeff, there's something else that concerns me. From reading Dr. Rosten's report it's not at all clear you understand that your dreams -- no matter how vivid they seem to you -- are just that, dreams."

"Christ, of course I know that," Jeff lied convincingly. Dreams? he thought. Right. Whatever happens when I shut my eyes is hard to explain but it sure as hell isn't dreams. Dreams aren't real, this is. Dreams don't pick up where they left off, this does. So can I please not have any more wires strapped to my head because it's obvious they don't tell you a goddamn thing.

Jeff had lived with it his whole life and even he had trouble understanding it. It always started with fatigue -- not just at bedtime (as if there was such a thing for him) but at odd times: during lunch, or a shower, or a tennis match. The sudden exhaustion would force him to lie down and shut his eyes. And start to dreams -- no, it wasn't dreams. Rather, Jeff would... become someone else, somewhere else. If any of these witch doctors at Duke Medical had ever listened to him they could've checked it out themselves. Yesterday Jeff had asked Dr. Rosten -- the psychiatrist on this team -- if he wanted the name and address. Call him up, Jeff had suggested. Clyde Wasserman, 102 Marco Rd., Wilmington, Delaware. You want the zip code? I've got it. You want to know what Clyde wore last night? You've come to the right place. Or ask me something about Wilmington. I've never been there so how come I know it like the back of my hand?

Jeff had never been to Delaware (not as Jeff anyway). The farthest north he'd been was Virginia when he and his father drove up one weekend last fall to a Duke-UVA football game. And except for two weeks in Jamaica, he'd spent nearly all his life in North Carolina -- the first eighteen years in Greensboro, the last three at school in Durham.

But he knew Delaware intimately: the shortcut to Phipps's Gulf, the liquor stores with the best prices, the street corners where you could get decent cocaine. He knew all this and more because whenever he slept, that's where Mr. Sandman sent him -- to his other life, the one in Wilmington.

Clyde, of course, saw it differently; to him Jeff was the dream.

Unlike Jeff's parents who had taken their son to every doctor this side of the Mason-Dixon line, Clyde's parents had never bothered. At one point they had thought about taking Clyde to a psychiatrist but Mr. Wasserman decided against it -- "A hundred bucks an hour for medical horseshit." Instead, once when Clyde was sixteen, his father came into his room and said: "Just shut the fuck up about that guy in North Carolina." From that moment on Clyde had not mentioned it.

A smile lit Jeff's face as he left the classroom. Time to party. This was the first semester in three and a half years of college that he didn't get stuck with an exam on the last day of exam period. Now another semester was history; seven down, one to go. He thought he'd done well on the test but right now he didn't care: Monetary Theory 305 was a bitch (especially when Havrilesky taught it) and Jeff was just glad to finally get it over with.

As he left the gothic building a rush of cold air blasted his face. Finally, Christmas break. He hesitated at the top of the stairs and a group of students hurried past him. In the distance, he saw students loading their cars. Some would stick around for parties tonight and tomorrow night and then head home.

When the crowd thinned he noticed Cynthia coming up the stairs toward him. She was as pretty as any girl on campus and that said a lot. She reached the top, threw her arms around him, and kissed the back of his neck. "How'd you do?" she asked.

"Good, I think; let's go celebrate."

"I thought you might want to do that," she said, pulling two cans of Miller Lite from her purse.

"Very thoughtful of you." The beer had been kept cold by the December air. The very best thing about going to a private school, Jeff thought, is being able to drink alcohol outdoors any time of the day or night.

They walked slowly back to Jeff's room, arms around each other, jackets pressed tightly together. When they got there, Jeff unlocked the door with his left hand, leaving his right arm around Cynthia. As they stepped inside she said what he hoped she would: "You know the parties don't start for five or six hours."

"I know."

She wrapped her other arm securely around him. "Good thing you don't have a roommate," she said immediately before kissing him.

He closed the door with his foot since his hands were busy undressing

Cynthia -- first the white winter jacket, then her sweater, then her slacks. Her hands were busy unzipping his jeans. First things first. Jeff laughed at how tangled up they were, and they were still tangled when they fell naked in bed. Her breasts were as perfect as her face and legs and Jeff gently ran both his hands over every inch of her. Then he began to kiss the soft body his hands had just caressed. Soon he was completely on top of her and she pulled him closer and closer, not stopping until he was inside her. The coldness on his back felt good now that the warmth of the friction between his body and hers balanced it. He couldn't think about kissing her and being inside her at once because it felt so good it hurt. A few moments later he hardly realized that he had come, because at the time he was thinking of the kissing.

Jeff pulled the blankets over them for protection from the winter. Twenty minutes later, as they made love for a second time, the blankets and sheets fell to the floor and Jeff would have reached down to pick them up if only he wasn't having so much fun.

Clyde woke perspiring. Cynthia was too good to be true -- just too good. If it weren't for Jeff, Clyde thought, the only way I'd get to fuck girls like that would be to rape them. By far the best thing about dreaming Jeff's life was the girls he went to bed with: gorgeous girls -- girls who looked like Cynthia. Like Karen Baker from two years ago, and Sarah McLeary from Jeff's junior year.

As Clyde's head cleared he became aware of his alarm clock screaming in the background. Reaching to turn it off, he felt a puddle of warm semen in his already filthy sheets. Sometimes that happened when Jeff made love. The suddenly quiet bedroom brought back the extreme fatigue. It overtook Clyde; he buried his head in the pillow and let himself return to North Carolina for a few minutes.

"I hate that," Cynthia said, her voice barely registering.

"Hate what?" Jeff asked wearily. Instinctively he pulled her naked body closer.

"I hate that every time we make love, you fall asleep right after."

"Don't take it personally; it's not just you."

"You mean you fall asleep after sex with your other girls too?" She smiled. Ever since they began dating last semester she had been painfully aware of his erratic sleeping patterns.

"No, that's not what I mean." He threw a mock punch lightly against her

cheek. "Can we not talk about it right now?"

"Okay." She kissed him, got out of bed, and started dressing. "I'm going back to my room to change and get pretty for the party -- "

" -- you're already pretty," he broke in.

"Okay, then I'm going to get prettier."

"Can't be done."

She stood by the door and looked at him. "You're allowed to sleep a little more now if you want -- but I'll be back at 7:30 for dinner and parties -- no sleeping then."

He nodded agreement.

As she left she turned around and said, "I love you."

"I love you too," he said and meant it."

Shit, Clyde thought, late for work again.

He grabbed a pair of torn jeans from the floor; not finding a clean work shirt he put on the one that smelled least. He never saw the point of washing the clothes he pumped gas in; they would only get filthy again.

He sped through downtown Wilmington in his rusty, nine-year-old piece of shit Chevrolet, wishing he had Jeff's brand new Audi. The Audi was a replacement for the BMW that was totaled in last summer's wreck. Clyde thought of the other aspects of Jeff's life: the trip to Jamaica last spring break, Cynthia, room and board at one of the most expensive schools in the country, the 20,000 dollars Jeff's parents had given their son on his twenty-first birthday. Clyde received two gifts for his: a bottle of Jack Daniels and a pat on the head. "Congratulations," his father had said, "you're legal now."

In the rearview mirror Clyde saw gray smoke pouring from the Chevy's tailpipe. Maybe he could tell Phipps he was late because of car trouble. Give him any excuse you want, Clyde told himself, it doesn't matter and you know it, cause you've been late one too many times.

One more mile and he would be at Phipps's Gulf. The thought of facing his boss sickened him.

At least you have to live through my hell too, college-boy. Hope you like it,

Mr. Jeff Education.

Clyde couldn't have gotten accepted to any college worth going to (and if he could have he knew goddamn well that he would have had to pay for it himself). Thinking about it now, he guessed it really didn't matter -- he knew everything Jeff knew: all that shit about Keynes and the money supply and tours and Descartes and elastic curves. He wished Jeff would stop cramming that worthless crap into their mind. He wished Jeff would never go to class and just spend all his time fucking Cynthia, or maybe Kathy Oilman from last year (now there was someone who knew what she was doing in bed).

Clyde turned the corner and even at a distance he could see the metal sign: Phipps's Gulf. He thought about turning around rather than facing Mr. Phipps.

He switched his mind back to girls; he compared the Duke girls to the hideous women he sometimes took back to his nasty apartment -- there wasn't much comparison at all: the women Clyde brought home were always rancid; Jeff had always thought so, and now, after Karen and Cynthia, Clyde thought so too. He was losing his taste for them. And he was losing his taste (not that he ever really had one) for his shit car, his shit apartment, and his shit life.

He wanted sleep.

Real sleep. Time out from the world. What does that feel like?

Once before, five months ago, he thought he felt sleep for a moment.

It was at the end of summer. Jeff had been home in Greensboro, out with friends on a Saturday night. The next day he would return to Duke -- classes started Monday morning. A girl had come on to Jeff at Bentley's Cafe and Clyde wished Jeff had taken her home (she had a particularly nice ass and it would have been a very sweet dream). Only he didn't take her home -- all he could think about was seeing Cynthia the next day. So Jeff left early: he knew Cynthia well and undoubtedly he would need his energy when he saw her.

On the drive home Jeff wasn't drunk but the guy that ran into him was. The collision nearly killed Jeff. It would have if he hadn't had his seatbelt on. As it was his head rammed into the steering wheel rather than the windshield. He had four broken ribs from where the belt held him back. The grill of the BMW ended up in the mangled engine and it took two guys with blowtorches thirty minutes to get the door open and get Jeff out.

At the hospital they kept him so pumped full of drugs that he slept virtually

all the time, so Clyde was forced to stay up night after night.

But the second night in the hospital it happened: Clyde closed his eyes when he felt tired and -- he didn't become Jeff. Not immediately anyway. For a few moments he thought he felt what sleep, sweet dreamless sleep, must be like. Like a vacation. Like being able to turn yourself off from the world.

Unconscious darkness.

That was the only time.

Now, when Clyde pulled into the station, Mr. Phipps, a fat ugly asshole, wasn't happy. Not at all. He was pumping gas into cars, gas that Clyde was supposed to be pumping. His large belly was not held in well by his white oil-stained shirt. The sight of Clyde turned his face a sunburned color. Phipps ran toward Clyde's Chevy screaming. "DON'T GET OUT OF THAT CAR -- JUST KEEP DRIVING. Jesus Christ, you'd think just once you could be on time. Just once. You think I hired you so I could pump gas while you beat off?"

Clyde tried to explain: "I over -- "

" -- I know. You overslept. Well tough shit. Its fucking 7:00 at night... just get the fuck out of my sight."

Clyde did. He drove slowly through town with nowhere to go. Tired as usual, he considered going back to the apartment, but the thought of going back to that mattress (with God knows what insects in it) repulsed him. He stopped at some place called the Oasis Bar. A Budweiser and a grilled cheese sandwich helped some but he still felt like crap. He ordered another beer and then another -- best just to get drunk, fall asleep, and vacation in North Carolina for a while.

He put his head down on his corner table in the almost empty bar.

Jeff is 14. He is waiting for the letter. Is this real? It can't be, but he knows it is. The letter will not come. He pours some milk and waits longer for the mailman, already an hour late. The mailman fills the box and leaves. Jeff slowly opens the door, and without looking, grabs the mail. Slowly, a letter at a time, he files through it. The letter is there, second to last. He looks at the envelope addressed to him. In the upper left hand corner, scribbled in black ink, was the return address:

Clyde Wasserman 102 Marco Rd. Wilmington, Del

He opens the letter though he knows what it says because he was there when it was written. It says only:

I knew it was real.

Clyde

Jeff woke quickly in his dark room. Cynthia was coming in, knocking as she opened the unlocked door.

She stood silent over the bed.

She looked like a billion dollars; her brunette hair was perfect. Her long-sleeved white satin blouse was tucked snugly into her gray wool slacks making her bra slightly visible through the fabric.

"Jesus, you look good," he said.

"Well you don't; you're supposed to be ready -- you promised."

"Sorry." Jeff jumped out of bed. "Give me one minute," he said, throwing on a bathrobe and then grabbing a bottle of Head & Shoulders and a leather shaving kit.

He hurried back into the room with his hair still soaked. She browsed through a copy of Playboy while he got dressed. It took him two tries to get his tie the right length; it was the first date in a long while that he'd worn one -- usually they just went to a movie or drinking somewhere on campus. But tonight, to celebrate the end of exams, they had reservations at The Station and you couldn't get in there without a tie. Jeff felt refreshed, not fatigued, but he knew Mr. Sandman could come suddenly at any time: Clyde was asleep on a barroom table and Jeff wasn't sure how long Clyde would be allowed to stay there.

At The Station Jeff and Cynthia both ordered steaks so Jeff requested a good California Cabernet Sauvignon. (Let's see, he thought, what would you prefer, Clyde? Boone's Farm perhaps? Maybe recent vintage Wild Irish Rose?)

Soon they were eating and laughing and talking about what a jerk Professor Broffenbrener was when the fatigue came on like a storm. Jeff did something he rarely did. He fought it. Goddamn it, stay awake now, he told himself.

"Are you okay?" he heard Cynthia ask.

"Yeah, fine. Sorry."

He fought harder: his left foot and arm were already asleep, and it took all his concentration to keep his head clear.

It was no use.

Jeff stood up weakly. "We'd better go. I don't feel well," he mumbled. He managed to pull out his wallet and throw more than enough money on the table. As they walked out he said: "Listen, you better go to the parties without me. Go with Karen and Lynn, I'm gonna have to sleep."

Cynthia frowned. She had seen this many times before but tonight more than ever her disappointment was evident. "Listen, let me take you to a doctor."

"I've told you: I've been to every doctor there is; please, honey, just get me home."

Cynthia got behind the wheel of the Audi and before she got the car started Jeff was gone.

"Jesus, buddy, would you wake up!" Clyde felt hands on both his shoulders. "Hey, sleeping beauty, you can't pass out here; this ain't no hotel." The ugly man was two inches from Clyde's face, speaking loudly. "We thought you were dead. I never seen anyone so hard to wake."

Paying for the food and beers left Clyde with about forty dollars in his pocket: he'd spent half his last paycheck on cocaine (and it wasn't much of a paycheck to begin with). He stumbled into the parking lot and, for a few minutes, sat freezing in the car with nowhere to go.

Cynthia helped Jeff from the car back to his room. He hated letting her down like this but it was nothing that hadn't happened on important occasions before (the worst time was when he slept through a Duke-Carolina basketball game). She put him in bed, carefully placed the covers over him, kissed him, and said quietly: "Why couldn't I have fallen in love with an insomniac."

Clyde is sixteen. He tries to sleep, to go to North Carolina. Through the cardboard-like walls of his crumbling house the sounds of his father screaming at his mother fill the room. Outside the neighbor's dog is barking. The fatigue has come but he cannot escape to the other place. The noise is too great. Clyde hears a dull thud and he knows it is a punch being thrown. Then another. A door slams. His father has stormed away to somewhere. Clyde's mother sobs loudly in her room. He could sleep now if only the neighbor's dog would shut up. It won't. Clyde rises from his bed, tired, tired. The clock says eight P.M. He grabs his hunting knife, the one his father gave him, and walks out the door to the neighbor's yard. The beagle runs to greet him. Dogs are so trusting, he thinks. Clyde pets the puppy with a long slow stroke. From behind, Clyde pulls the dog's head up with his left

hand and with his right (please don't, he almost hears Jeff say) he carves a red slit into the dog's throat. Now there would be quiet for a while.

Two men staggered out of the Oasis Bar, laughing.

The warmth of the bed's blankets was gone; in the car there was only cold.

Clyde knew where he could go and he knew what he had to do. A way to get some sleep.

North Carolina would be nice this time of year.

It was 8:30 P.M. now.

He could be there by 2:00 in the morning if he sped. He reached into the glove compartment of the Chevy. The car's inside light had not worked in years but there was enough light from the Oasis Bar's neon sign. His knife was still there and so was the cocaine.

It took three tries to get the car started -- the first two times sounded like he was trying to shove a piece of metal into a fan. Finally it started.

He drove the Chevy across the street into a Quick Mart and got some gas and a twelve-pack of beer.

It seemed strange now to Clyde that he and Jeff had never met. A few times they'd thought about meeting halfway (near Richmond maybe) but it would have been a boring conversation: you can't say much to a sleeping person. And from the time they were old enough to do it Jeff had not really wanted to. College-boy is ashamed to be acquainted with me, he thought. Excuse me for not liking golf.

So now they would finally meet.

It really wasn't murder, Clyde thought.

Nothing like it. Jeff would just be... relocated. What would Jeff's business teacher have called it? Consolidation. A merger perhaps. Or you could look at it as a form of suicide. Take your pick.

Then there would be sleep. Lots of it, every night, just as the Good Lord intended.

But God he would miss screwing Cynthia and the others.

His cold Chevy continued down 1-95.

Clyde bet himself that Jeff would be asleep when he got there.

Soon Clyde was somewhere in Virginia. Outside of Petersburg a new rattling sound came from the Chevy's engine. All he hoped for was that the car would stay in one piece until he got to Duke and back. Once he took care of Jeff he could take Jeff's Gold Visa and get \$500 from the cash machine. Cynthia probably would have been pissed off if she'd known that Jeff's 6-digit code was KATHY1: that's who he was dating last year when he opened the account.

He turned off 1-95 onto 1-85, and then paid a toll.

Soon there would be perfect sleep. Nights of quiet. Dreamless nights -- or at least dreams that weren't real.

The white on the green background said: DURHAM 120 MILES. One and a half hours at this speed. That would put the estimated time of arrival at 2:00 and the approximate time of death at 2:15.

Now it was just after midnight and Clyde began to feel Jeff trying to break through, trying to send him to sleep.

Jeff was fighting. Fighting hard, fighting for his life.

Clyde tired. His eyes shut for a moment and he was jolted back by the sound of the gravel under the tires as he veered off the highway. He managed to steer back onto the road and then, still startled, he pulled over. His left side was asleep but with his right arm he groped in the dark glove compartment. He felt the sharp blade of the hunting knife, but he didn't need that, not just yet. Deeper in, he felt the plastic packet containing the cocaine: he had about a half gram left. He carefully unwrapped the tiny bag -- a corner cut from a baggy -- and, still working only with his right hand, dipped his key into the powder, raised it to his right nostril, and snorted.

The same for the left nostril.

Almost instantly he felt more alert. More alive.

He repeated the process.

Finally he dipped his finger in and rubbed some coke into the walls of his cheeks and mouth -- he always enjoyed the numbing sensation.

That should keep Mr. Sandman in Durham for a while.

Feeling came back to his left side and soon he was on the road again. He left

the remainder of the powder on the passenger seat for easy access. I may need it again, he thought.

Soon he saw familiar exits along the highway -- but in an unfamiliar way. He knew the stretch of 1-85 going into Durham. Jeff had driven it many times before. There was the all night Exxon station. There was Bojangles Chicken.

The closer he got the more excited he became.

He passed the Hardee's on the left -- Jeff and Cynthia usually got biscuits there on Sunday mornings.

Finally: Exit 751. Duke University.

Two minutes later Clyde pulled the Chevy into the West Campus lot and shut off the engine, not believing this old car had managed to bring him all the way from Delaware.

He snorted the rest of the cocaine and then licked the plastic container clean. Next he slid the hunting knife under his bulky green winter jacket. For the first time he walked onto the campus he knew by heart. It was nearly two in the morning now but there were still parties dying down. Quiet music came from several of the common rooms; on the way he saw a light from the ground floor of Cynthia's sorority. Cynthia would still be up he bet; she was one of the last to leave any party. Such a social animal. He looked in. She had changed clothes since earlier in the evening; now she had on jeans and sweater.

I've got some business to take care of now, Cyn, but I may have a few minutes for a good-bye fuck before I head back up north. You don't know it, but I've been inside of you -- I was inside you every time Jeff was.

He walked toward Jeff's dorm. A couple passed the other way, drunk and laughing.

Clyde went to the side door -- the guys always left it propped open. He went slowly down the familiar hall. No one in sight. He walked toward room 106. He checked the knife again and he thought he sensed Jeff trying to fight through but the coke kept Clyde awake no problem and Clyde was glad that Jeff would have to watch his own death through a dream.

On the right: room 114. Jack Lofton's.

112.

110.

To the left: 109. Frank and Stan's room.

108.

He could feel Jeff fighting like a maniac, trying to jolt himself out of sleep, to send Clyde to dreamland.

Across from 108, in the alcove, there was a pinball machine he didn't remember.

106.

We meet at last, collegeboy. If only for a moment.

Clyde knew the door was unlocked as always. Jeff would be sleeping. He turned the knob slowly and quietly and walked into the dark room. He flicked the light switch and was about to pull out his knife for the execution.

"HEY GET THE FUCK OUT OF MY ROOM!" a male voice shouted.

Clyde was shocked that Jeff was awake -- and then he saw that it wasn't Jeff at all; it was a stranger. The stranger was nude but was struggling to put on a pair of gym shorts. On the bed a frightened female, also naked, pulled the bedsheets around her neckline to cover her body.

Clyde glanced around the well-lit room. It was not the room he knew: where Jeff had a picture of Bach there was now was a picture of Bruce Springsteen; the desk was in a different corner; the bed was on the wrong side of the room, and the spread was blue instead of brown.

Everything was different.

And Jeff was not here -- but he had to be.

Clyde, stunned, backed into the hall, glanced at the door again. Right room: 106. He supported himself against the wall. Seconds later the stranger was on him, screaming: "Hey, dickhead, what's your fucking problem?"

Clyde managed to get some words out: "Sorry. Sorry. I was looking for a friend; I thought this was his room."

"Well, it's not." Then, surprisingly calmer, the stranger asked: "What's your friend's name?"

"Never mind."

"What's his name?" the stranger asked again forcibly.

Clyde told him. "His name's Jeff Goodwin."

The stranger said nothing.

Clyde pressed, "Do you know him?" The stranger's eyes said that he did. "You do know him -- don't you?"

"Yeah."

"Well, where is he? I came a long way to see him."

The stranger stood quiet for a moment. "Look, I'm not sure how to say this but... Jeff's dead. This was his room for two years. He was killed in a car wreck last summer, hit by a drunk driver a few days before classes. I thought all his friends knew by now." He added kindly: "You want to come in and sit down for a few minutes?"

Clyde walked away, staggering. The cocaine and adrenaline were wearing off and he felt tired. He walked into the common room and lay down on one of the couches. He had no reason to stay awake.

Soon he was Jeff at 17. He was taking a math test and he was sure he'd gotten all the problems right except for two. Jeff finished ahead of time and lay his head down on the wood desk.

Renaissance

by A. F. Kidd

*A. F. Kidd, better known to her friends as Chico, has written and illustrated three small chapbooks of her own stories: *Change & Decay*, *In and Out of the Belfry*, and her latest, *Bell Music*, from which the following story is taken. Born in Nottingham on April 21, 1953, Kidd presently lives in Middlesex, where she manages to find time from her work to indulge her interests in Jamesian ghost stories and in campanology, the English art of change-ringing (it has to do with bells in towers -- look it up). Fortunately, since spare time is in short supply, she is able to combine illustration, writing, and bell-ringing all in one, and she is a frequent contributor to the British small press.*

Now, about that novel. Kidd explains: "I'm still trying to get this damn sf novel under way but things like work intrude: I've got a design and advertising business now which seems to give me no spare time at all. You could say I'm working on it, if you like: I know more or less what's going to happen in it, it's just a case of transferring it from my head to paper!" Ah, there's the rub...

It's fashionable to say that the English have a fascination for Tuscany, but most people then go on to make derogatory remarks and deplore the fact that you can't spit without hitting an expatriate writer. I like to think that I like the area for its own sake. I love the crumbling voluptuousness of Florence: they paint the buildings in fading flesh-tones, which always put me in mind of peeling suntans. But it's uncompromising, too: presenting sleepy blank green-shuttered eyes to you instead of windows, and quite oblivious of the scooters skimming its narrow cobbly streets.

I first visited Tuscany more years ago than I care to remember, at the invitation of an extraordinary man by the name of Enrico Camilletti. An antiquarian and Anglophile, he and his family had been interned during the war (he'd been doing research at Cambridge) until a talent of his, which I'm not allowed to talk about, came to light; and that was how we met.

The Army's talent for inapt job selection, which sets the tone-deaf to bugling and the myopic to photographic reconnaissance, put me in Intelligence, a devious and exacting business for which my only qualification was linguistic ability. I had been trained as a singer, having what I was told was a "warm Italian tenor," and somehow had been seduced into learning to speak the languages as I learned to sing them. That, and painting, unmartial talents, gave me an entree to Enrico's

world, and a useful Intelligence coup.

All this is old history; but when Enrico and his daughter (his wife had died in 1942, of cancer) returned to Italy, he left me with an open invitation to visit, and eventually I did so, armed with rucksack and paints.

Italy, perhaps by virtue of its past of warring city-states, still strikes me as extraordinarily diverse: Venice, which snags at the memory like a thorn, casting visions of narrow alleys and the reflections of gondolas; Rome, which I hate, being like London with ruins (only dirtier); the involved coast of the south, where houses climb the cliffs. And Tuscany, tower-studded, a landscape of trees like mist and hills like smoke, with the spiky diagrams of cypresses inked on the horizon and ragged red rooftops among the olive groves.

In the hills surrounding Florence I found a great domed church which could have been the twin of Sant-Andrea del la Valle in Rome, where the first act of Tosca is set.

The church struck chords within me as soon as I saw it: the sort of cool calm sacred stone, which opens into frescoes and mosaics of startling, ancient brilliance. There are parts of Tuscany where you feel overloaded with art, glutted with color, sated with gold, and the Renaissance lies long aeons in the future: there was a part of this church, San Donatus di Fiesole, which was so old it was almost alien. Most of it was fourteenth century, but one of the tiny chapels attached to it, cold rough stone, gave off such an aura -- or perhaps it would be more accurate to say "miasma" -- of age that you could almost believe the builder would have remembered the Apostles from personal experience. And the frescoes were, literally, unbelievable. On seeing them for the first time it felt as if my heart had suddenly loosened within me: I had entered that chapel expecting -- well, nothing at all; and had been confronted with something like a revelation.

As I entered, my eyes strained in the dim darkness: I could practically feel the pupils dilating. Gradually, as I became accustomed to the gloom, glints of jewel-like color and the dull gleam of gold began to encroach on my vision.

They were brilliant, those frescoes: as detailed as photographs. Slowly I paced along the chapel. Up and down I went: to and fro. Once or twice I touched, very delicately, the painted surface, almost unable to believe it was only a wall.

Some artist of consummate skill had been at work there: some painter so far ahead of his time that his fame should have shouted from there to Rome and beyond. Here shone a saint, his face abstracted; there, an angel of such beauty that

it almost hurt to behold.

After a time, I became aware that a darker vision than I had first thought had been at work. The unknown artist had enhanced the beauty of his religious subject matter by introducing contrasts in the form of the grotesque and revolting. Grinning skulls and drooling demons leered from corners, made more malevolent by the skill of the draughtsmanship.

I came to a shuddering halt in front of one figure. It seemed to exude a powerful impression of evil quite disproportionate to its image: my spine crawled at the sight, yet there was little to see. It was cloaked, clawed; its face in shadow. Within its dark hood shone two faint glows, as of eyes. I decided I was quite glad that the artist had spared his audience full sight of the creature -- it was the sort of thing, had I been able to see what it really looked like, that would have destroyed my sanity in one glimpse. The thing was terrible for its understatement, its hidden threat -- there was no artifice there, no cheap shock value. But you knew, incontrovertibly, what it was. It was rather as if someone had shown me a pit and said: That's Hell. And I had known it for the literal truth.

I walked quite rapidly out of the chapel. Through the outer door, the sun had laid a honey-colored rectangle on the church's stone floor. Outside, a balmy breeze stirred the pale leaves of the olive trees, and pointed black cypresses moved gently. All quite normal. But I couldn't shake off the dull, poisonous conviction that that painted image was the representation of the negation of all that my life signified: music, art, harmony; all pleasant things.

Still, something compelled me to go and look again. This time, I saw the beautiful, not the grotesque. Sometimes Renaissance art is cruel to women (although it is not the artists, but the conventions of the time; you might just as well say, as I have heard some foolish people do, that opera is misogynistic); but here I found an image, which I ached to copy. I had no camera, and even if I had, in those days it would have been the height of discourtesy to go flashing lights in a church.

Mary Magdalene, I guessed: a tear glinted in her eye. Her hair was fair, like Primavera's: a little blonde strand fell over one brow. Tosca came into my mind again -- *Chi e quella donna bionda lassu? / La Maddalena. Ti place? / E troppo bella.*

I looked to see whether I could find someone -- priest? Sacristan? To give me permission to paint in the church, but in that early afternoon there was little sign of life. Lizards sneaked in the old stonewalls, the swiftest creatures to be seen;

a few sightseers were wandering round in the gentle October sun. The only other moving objects were a pair of Franciscan monks in their brown habits, beneath which the sandals, which poked out, looked incongruously modern.

So I sat down on a wall and gazed absently at the delicate mist, which lay over Florence below, giving Brunelleschi's majestic dome the appearance of floating in a sea of cobwebs. And that was when things began to happen, on a misty-gold autumn day in Tuscany.

I flapped my shirt to try and cool down: I was running with sweat. A movement snagged the corner of my eye, and I turned, unaccountably troubled, but nothing was to be seen. Eventually, I decided, tentatively, to approach the monks; and after some consultation ascertained that it would be quite all right for me to paint inside the church.

In front of La Maddalena I set up my easel and began sketching, and sang *Recondita armonia* from *Tosca* because I felt just like Cavaradossi painting there. It was late when I packed up, leaving the easel where it was.

Enrico Camilletti inhabited the top floor apartment in a crumbling sunburn-colored building overlooking the river and (if you leaned out of the window and squinted) the Ponte Vecchio. The stairs were steep, worn stone, with cast-iron railings: it seemed a very long way to the top. But I was tired anyway, and went to bed early -- I was supposed to be on holiday for a rest (I had been working much too hard recently). That night I had an odd dream, which I was unable quite to recall in the morning. All that remained was a sense of something receding, and a voice saying (for all the world like something from an Italian-language course) "Non e qui; e li." It's not here, it's there.

The following day I was eager to return to the church and get on with my painting; Enrico's daughter Silvana asked me if she could come with me, and her father gave her permission -- you have to remember that this was not long after the war, when children were more dutiful than they are now, and Silvana was, oh, about seventeen, I should think. She was a nice, lively, bright child, as you would expect if you knew her father; fair and pretty and as thin as a stick.

It's still difficult to talk about this. It was rather like being shot. My copy of the fresco had changed -- had been changed. I didn't, couldn't, believe it at first: I remember taking off my glasses and polishing them, as if that would restore reality.

Framed by the ash-pale hair was a face turned hideous, corrupted into a

worm-ridden thing of decay. Obscenely, a scab-colored tongue protruded between delicately pointed teeth.

I gasped for breath. Felt, physically, blood draining out of my face, and then surging back in like lava. Fury is too light a word. I wanted to commit murder.

"Dio," said Silvana softly, reaching out a tentative hand to the easel. I ripped the paper off before she could touch it, and she jumped back, startled.

"They weren't like this," she said, gesturing vaguely at the walls.

"What do you mean?"

She looked at the frescoes surrounding us with their primitive colors, vibrant and vital.

"They must have been -- hidden -- somehow. And now, for some reason, they're getting clearer again."

I saw what she meant, impossible as it sounded. "You mean if they'd been visible for centuries, they'd be famous?"

She nodded, and then suddenly pointed at the wall. "Look."

I looked. I winced. I don't know how I'd missed it. In the crowd gathered round the Crucifixion scene was a familiar face. It was identical: the blonde hair, the soft and rotting features. The tongue. And looking at the crowd now, I could see many more corrupted faces: not caricatures, but something more unpleasant.

So I searched for the cloaked figure, which had somehow taken on the role of a leitmotiv. (Was it something perhaps in a cloak, which kept sliding out of the corners of my vision?) There; it seemed clearer than it had been: the draperies gleamed, as if wet under moonlight, silver like snail-trails. Here and there the cloth molded itself to the form beneath: the shape of its limbs was totally unhuman.

"What if they're getting out?" whispered Silvana. I wasn't sure I'd heard her right at first. "I'm going to borrow Father's camera tomorrow."

"Will they mind you taking photographs?"

"Don't worry. If you smile and act humble, it's amazing what you can get away with."

"Let's go and have a drink," I said. Silvana hesitated. "I bet they won't move while you're looking at them."

"Like The Mezzotint, you mean?" she said, surprising me. "You're probably right."

As we passed the easel she cast a glance in its direction, which gave me an idea. I had a small sketchpad, which I hadn't actually used, but which I'd left by the easel.

"Do you think that'll have changed too?"

"That's what I want to find out," I replied, opening it. The first half-dozen pages were blank, but the next one, randomly selected, perhaps, bore an unpleasantly familiar outline, seemingly drawn in charcoal: that of a cloaked figure. Beneath it, in crabbed capitals, was the legend CAVEAT PICTOR.

"Beware the -- ?"

"Let the artist beware," I corrected her. "It's a warning, then. But why mess up the Magdalene picture?"

"It didn't," she said. Her voice had the inevitability of rain. "Whatever changed the picture is the thing you've got to beware of. After all, you've seen it, haven't you?"

Dark shape sliding past the corner of my eye. "Yes, I think so."

"And so did our unknown fresco painter."

"And it's his -- ghost -- that's warning us." I couldn't quite bring myself to say "me."

"Doesn't it make sense?" asked Silvana, sounding very like her father. "If it debased his paintings, wouldn't he want to warn another painter?"

"What is it, then, the thing in the cloak?"

She shrugged. "Elemental, demon, devil?" The word "elemental" reminded me of something. If she'd read James -- ?

"Did you ever read a story called Celui-la?"

" 'M, yes: who wrote it? Not M. R. James. Le Fanu?"

"Eleanor Scott."

"Yes, I was about thirteen when I read it -- it scared the hell out of me."

"Me, too," I agreed. "Well, that's what this reminds me of." Silvana looked back into the dim church. " Won e qui; e li'," I muttered.

"What?"

"Something I dreamed."

" 'It's not here; it's there'. I wonder what that's supposed to mean."

"Mm," I said.

"Well," she observed, "it's when 'it's here' that we really need to worry."

"That's a really nice thought. Thanks, Silvana."

Enrico was out when we got back, as he frequently seemed to be; it wasn't so easy to forget about elementals and things, which hid in cloaks, however. I got a real attack of the creeps that night, the worst I'd had since I was a child, suddenly turning cold all over in inexplicable panic. " 'Non e qui,' " I told myself, firmly. Then I switched the light on. The window was shuttered and the thin yellow curtain inside drawn, the bed turned down. But there were dark things in the corners of my eyes. They slid away when I tried to look at them. My hands were shaking.

I hadn't expected to sleep, but the lights were still on when I woke up, not as bright as the pencil-lines of daylight outlining the shutters. I opened them before switching off the lights: the walls nearby were already festooned with washing strung from every little balcony, though the air was still chill with mist drifting from the Arno. The city smelled old and salty-sweet.

Silvana was up already, and eager to go. She scribbled a note for her father, and practically dragged me out of the apartment. True to her word, she charmed permission to take photographs, and spent the morning doing so: I sat outside sketching and wondering about things you see in your peripheral vision. We had lunch in the one tiny trattoria in the town, and after that Silvana insisted on going to check up on the chapel.

I heard her indrawn breath first.

"It's gone, Harry," she hissed.

"My God, it must have got out," I whispered back, looking at the blank bare wall.

Where the hooded figure had been, the plaster had flaked away entirely.

Patches of damp, or lichen, were stuck on the gray wall, as if many centuries had elapsed since the painting had vanished; neither was there any trace of dust or fragments of plaster on the floor. A wash of something very chill ran down my back.

"I've got to get the pictures developed," Silvana said. "Because it was there this morning."

"Silvana, my dear," I said to her, "I know this seems like a nice little puzzle for you, but do you seriously think this thing is dangerous? Because I don't mind admitting that it's beginning to get to me."

"Have you seen it again?"

"I don't know. I've reached a stage when I don't know whether I'm imagining it or not."

"Let's go outside."

"What for?"

"To see if you can see anything." I looked reluctant. "Don't worry," she added, probably a bit too blithely. "I don't think it can do anything to you -- I think all it can do is just scare you."

"It's doing that all right."

But before we could get outside, someone else came in.

"Harry? Harry Denham? Silvana, are you there?" called a familiar voice. It was Enrico, and I was suddenly very glad to see him.

"Silvana's note -- garbled as it was -- reminded me of something," he said before either of us could begin to explain, and produced an ancient-looking book from somewhere within his clothing.

"Chiesi di Toscana" said the cover. There was a paper marking a page: I opened the book and read "La leggenda del pittore Bruno della Tone." Silvana and I deciphered the blurred print together.

"High on a hillside outside Florence lies the ancient town of San Donatus di Fiesole, named for the church which is still its dominant building. This town has probably been the site of a settlement for at least as long as nearby Fiesole, but it lacks the spectacular Roman remains of its neighbor.

"It is notable only for its church, which contains, or contained, a series of remarkable frescoes. Unfortunately, the ravages of time have all but destroyed most of the detail -- "

"Hidden," hissed Silvana, jabbing the page with her linger.

" -- but what remains indicates work of a high quality and quite remarkable beauty. Little is known of the artist, Bruno della Torre, save for a curious local legend which has him pursued to his death -- " I looked at Enrico, appalled. "Pursued to his death by an evil spirit called out of the earth. Apparently Bruno's skill was such that it provoked the malevolent spirit, which existed for the purpose of corrupting anything of beauty, into haunting him. The nameless one was not appeased until had achieved his death: it is a matter of record that della Torre died by drowning in the year 1341." I turned the page: there was no more.

"I need to do some more research," Enrico said. "Come back to the apartment, you two: you can help."

Pursued to his death. I felt my scalp prickle, and then the shudder darted all the way down my back. Something would be awaiting me outside, something old and clawed and malefic. A creeping dread sluiced over me, so strong I felt suddenly ill and weak. It was a physical thing, fiercer than any childhood terror, paralyzing powerful: I didn't know how to cope with it. I don't get stage fright now, because I'm confident in what I'm doing -- but this was terrifyingly different. It wasn't simply that I didn't want to step outside the sanctuary of the church -- I didn't think I could.

"Are you coming?" Enrico asked me.

"Yes," I replied, and my voice sounded normal enough, much to my surprise, "I want to get a jacket -- it's getting a bit chilly." And I stepped out of the church door. To this day I don't know how I did it. I could feel my hands shaking inside my pockets, and I had to grit my teeth to stop them from chattering. But I kept going. The other two followed; and so too did a shadow, which rested only in my own peripheral vision and never let itself be seen. Now, though, it seemed closer to me, as if each day it was somehow entrenching itself deeper into my existence like some sort of parasite. Soon I might touch it; soon, even, it might try to make me see it. But that was something I would not do. If will had anything to do with the matter.

"Wait here, I'll get my car," said Enrico. I looked at Silvana again, wondering whether she could see how scared I was. I tried to slow my breathing,

but something was shouting inside me to get away, to run, anywhere, but hurry! A bus pulled up opposite, and it was all I could do to restrain myself from dashing across the road and jumping on it. My mind framed the suggestion "let's get the bus" and I even opened my mouth to say it; and then a small red Fiat appeared and Enrico opened the passenger door.

As soon as Silvana shut the door the horror disappeared as abruptly as a thread snapping: I breathed out, suddenly aware of cold sweat on my face.

Enrico displayed admirable restraint in not asking any questions until we got upstairs, and then, having poured wine for all of us, looked at me enquiringly. I took a deep breath.

"Let me tell you what seems to be happening," I said, and explained as best I could.

"Extraordinary," said Enrico when I'd finished. "Remarkable. Let's see what we can find." He headed for the bookshelves.

"Have you ever seen a ghost before?" Silvana asked me. I shook my head. "Are you sure?"

"Positive," I said, "and anyway, it's not a ghost, according to that book. It's some kind of spirit. Out of the earth."

"Do you believe in ghosts?"

"I don't think so. I read ghost stories -- but I read science fiction too, so that doesn't prove anything."

"Actually I write ghost stories," said Silvana, "so I was just curious. It wasn't meant to be the third degree."

"Here's something," interrupted Enrico, handing me an ancient-looking tome. "This must be the source of the story in the book you've seen."

It was quite impossible to make out. I handed it back to him. "It's mediaeval -- isn't it? I can't make sense of it."

"It's -- ah -- fifteenth century. What it says -- mm. The painter called Bruno della Torre died in the year 1341, drowned in the Arno. A spirit out of the earth, of the kind we read of in the *De Mysteriis* of Andrea Verdecchio -- ' I have that, Silvana, can you find it for me? -- made sport to hound -- to dog his footsteps. Malevolent as Satan, its purpose was to chastise him for his art and to make

corrupt what he had painted. Paintings in the church of San Donatus it corrupted, but could not corrupt the Christ. Della Torre tried to halt its progress by -- ' I think this means something like 'imprisoning it in paint'? Does that make sense to you, Harry?"

"Well, it could," I said slowly. "If it means by painting the creature."

"I see what you mean.' -- But even his skill was not sufficient. Only his death would return it whence it came.' "

"It seems a bit unfair on poor old della Torre," I said.

"Have you found that book, Silvana?"

"Here," she replied, handing him an even older-looking book, curiously bound.

"In such disgraceful Latin, too," commented Enrico. "This will take a little time. Let's have some more wine."

"Is that -- I don't know the Italian -- a 'grimoire'?" I asked. "May I see?"

"Here; I don't know the word you use."

"Magic would be nigromancia... Libro nero?"

"Black book?" repeated Enrico.

"A magician's book? A book of spells?" I recalled the Latin word. "Grimorium?"

"Ah, I know. Yes, for summoning spirits and so on."

" 'I can call spirits from the vasty deep,' " said Silvana surprisingly, in English. I had to respond.

" 'But will they come -- ' Trouble is, one has, but we didn't call it," I added, looking over Enrico's shoulder. "Crikey, talk about dog Latin."

"Can you read it, Harry?"

"Can I hell," I said. "Maybe."

"Have you found something?" Silvana enquired.

"I don't know yet."

I looked up, out of the window, probably hoping not to see anything. It was getting dark outside, still, jeweled with lights. Silvana got to her feet at the same moment, and closed the shutters. Then she busied herself with the record player, and presently we got *Trovatore*. Verdi's music filled the room's corners. It seemed to me then that the pursuer could only threaten me out of doors; that sanctuary was to be found inside spaces.

"Here -- something," exclaimed Enrico. I went to look over his shoulder: he pointed to a passage in the book.

"What have you found?" asked Silvana.

"Something, yes. 'The creatures from the deep,' it says."

"From the deep? Sounds like some particularly lurid fiction."

"No, it's real enough, alas! This book was written by an old Italian magician in -- when, Enrico?"

"Oh, 1410 or around that time. Andrea Verdecchio, he was said to have the power of flying, like your Roger Bacon, Michael Scot."

"What does it say?" Silvana asked.

"It says," replied her father, "as far as I can make out, because this is the most execrable Latin I've ever seen, 'There are beings, creatures, call them spirits if you will, which reside in the earth, fiends of the earth, they who walk in deep places; there is much power in them but they are capricious and do not bend willingly to a man's rule.' Then I think it tells you how to summon them, but I don't think we'll read that bit -- "

"Power in the words," observed Silvana.

"But does it tell us how to get rid of them?" I asked. "To be more to the point."

"It's infuriatingly obtuse. In one place it says, um, 'Some of these spirits will not abide the sound of bells' and then it says the 'spirits of ill-favor' -- hang on, this might be it -- 'will not abide if they can be absorbed by their own image.' "

"Isn't that what Bruno tried?" asked Silvana.

"It must be," I said, "but the painting's gone -- "

"But your photos are still -- "

"My God -- -in the camera. I've got to send them off."

"Send them off?"

"They're slides, they have to -- "

"Never mind that," interrupted Enrico. "Phone Paolo Rossi -- his number's in the book -- he'll get them rushed through somewhere." Silvana went to the telephone.

"Do you think it'll come out on film?" I asked. "Would a picture of a picture work?"

"Perhaps we can trap it with a flashbulb," Enrico suggested. "Let me go and dig some out."

"He says to bring them round," Silvana said, putting down the phone. "He knows a lab. Shall I go?"

"We'll all go," her father said.

You never remember fear. Or -- that's not quite right -- you can't recall it accurately. Oh, I can remember all the physical sensations quite vividly, the purely automatic reactions my body was making to being under threat: heartbeat up, rapid breathing, dry mouth, stomach cramps, nausea, sweat; "sick with fear" is dead accurate. But I can't recreate the actual straining horror and dread of the unknown, terror of what lay unseen within the dark hood: the sure and utter conviction that there are things which can drive a man insane just by seeing them, even a thirty-five-year-old, pragmatic, highly educated inhabitant of the twentieth century. That's horror. That's what panic is, wanting to run and run from the impossible to assimilate. I didn't know what it could do -- suck the flesh from my bones, the soul from my body, leave me voiceless. I didn't know. That was the worst thing of all. Not knowing what I was going to face.

The stairwell was dark. Some of the lights had blown and not been replaced. Dim glows were discernible, but only made the shadows between them all the darker.

On rubbery legs I started down the stairs. The iron rail was cold to the touch. I reached the landing below, which was pitch black. "All clear," I called hoarsely, and heard the footsteps of the others.

"Wait," called Silvana. "One of us should go in front of you."

"I'll go first," volunteered Enrico. "I know the stairs."

We set off again, Enrico first, then myself, and then Silvana with the camera. My foot slipped, and I grabbed at the railing, heart lurching.

"You OK?" hissed Silvana.

"Yes," I whispered back, lying. Still, the next landing was lit. We halted again. Out of the shadows a cat yelled, making us all jump. (Why do all the cats in Tuscany seem to have such loud voices?)

"That cat will sing soprano if I get hold of it," I growled when we'd pulled ourselves together.

"It does already," said Enrico over his shoulder. "It's a female."

Halfway down the next flight I felt its presence. I started to turn, stopped myself in time, caught a dreadful glimpse in the flash of the camera of a grinning mouth with pale lips surrounding impossibly many teeth -- then something dreadfully cold, cold as starlight, raked across my face, knocking me off balance and sending my specs flying: I fell with a shout of alarm.

I tried to stop myself, but you can't halt a fall downstairs -- it just doesn't work; I hit my head a glancing blow on the railings, and then Enrico broke my fall. We went down together in a heap on the landing, and then he clutched my arm as a cry split the air.

The very shape of that cry was wrong -- no human throat could have given it voice. There was hunger in it, and fury, and hatred, and nothing at all of defeat.

Silvana came clattering down the stairs, her face white as ice, and the camera dangling from one hand. I groped for my specs, found them with one lens shattered. Too bad. I'd just have to walk around with fuzzy vision until I could get them replaced.

"Are you all right?" she demanded in an anguished whisper.

"I think so," I whispered back, getting unsteadily to my feet, as Enrico did the same. "What happened?"

"I'm not sure," Silvana admitted. "I felt something cold -- chilly air, but moving -- so I fired off the camera -- I certainly don't want to hear anything like that... noise... ever again."

"Or see it," I said. "Those teeth -- " I shut my eyes.

"We didn't see it," said Enrico. "All we saw was you -- and when you fell."

"Can you make it back upstairs?" Silvana asked me. I was holding myself upright by the railing. "Or the neighbors are going to start emerging. Your head --?"

"Hurts," I replied. "But I'll live."

"I'll take the film," said Silvana, and disappeared down the stairs. My legs didn't want to support me, so Enrico helped me back up to the apartment. Fumbling with his keys, he asked, "Has the creature gone, do you think?"

"I don't think so," I replied. "We may have burned its fingers (if it has fingers) but I don't think we've got rid of it."

Enrico unlocked the door. "I think food and rest, and some more wine," he said. "Then, Harry, we'll get back to the grimoire."

In the hall I caught sight of myself in a mirror. There was a lump the size of a golf-ball on my forehead and a line of bruises across my left cheekbone. I prodded it gingerly. That was where I'd felt the icy touch of my pursuer. If it was the mark of its claw, it had not broken the skin, but the place was chill and numb.

"You'll have a lovely shiner in the morning," said Enrico.

Dangerous. It was dangerous, and none of us had really realized. And none of us had the least idea what to do next. Enrico and I went back to the books, but their advice was at worst incomprehensible and at best conflicting. The business about the image, for instance: I still thought it might work, but couldn't make out whether it had to be an exact likeness, a painted figure, or a reflection in a mirror, and I couldn't really keep on and on baiting it until we got it right. We had to have a certain solution.

"I wish we could have filmed it," observed Silvana.

"Well we didn't," I said. "I didn't expect it to disappear from the wall."

"The wall..." she mused. Then her face suddenly lit up. "Harry! I've got it!"

"Got what?"

"I've cracked it, I think. If the photos come out."

"What've you thought of, Silvana?" asked her father.

"We project the image onto the wall! Life-size!"

Enrico looked thunderstruck, then grinned. "I hope those photos come out. Did Paolo say what time he'd get them in?"

"About half-past ten, I think. Can you borrow a slide projector?"

"I'll find one," Enrico said grimly. But it was late before he managed it.

I got through the day: even when the worst happens, you somehow keep going; giving up isn't the way to manage life. The dread I succeeded in tamping down to a vague sickness, which only surged up occasionally, but I was starting to get really twitchy by the time the four of us were crammed into Enrico's Fiat once more. Although I was convinced that Silvana's idea would work: the paint had become creature, and its image would be true. And the old magician's book implied that this would be enough.

The slides were clearer than any of us had hoped, showing in fine detail the cloak's folds (or were they the creases of bat-like wings?), the slug-track gleam of it, the humping inhuman outline.

We crept into the church like fugitives. The few candles burning here and there only accentuated the darkness, leaf-shaped flames making refugee afterimages in one's eyes. Windows were reduced to gray shapes on black, admitting no light. Enrico turned on his torch, and I was struck by how harsh its beam was, cold and contrasty.

"Here comes the bait," I said, swallowing bile, which had sneaked into my throat. Silvana squeezed my hand.

"Don't worry," she whispered. "It'll work."

Enrico pushed open the door of the chapel. If I go in there, I thought, will I ever come out again? My legs felt boneless. We crowded in; the torch picked out a trestle table with a slide projector sitting on top of it.

"How long?" murmured Enrico.

"Not long," I replied. I was certain of that, if of nothing else. It was homing in on me like a beacon: I was brighter than a lighthouse to it, and as difficult to extinguish; and it had marked me, too.

Then the door slammed shut. Enrico told me later that it had wrenched itself out of his grasp and all but crushed the foot he'd positioned in the doorway.

Someone drew in a sharp breath.

"Oh God," I whispered, as a great wave of freezing, foetid air broke past me. Light burst on the opposite wall like a sun: Enrico had turned on the projector; I was transfixed, seeing shadow and darkness boil and coalesce into a vast looming shape. The wall itself seemed to flow into it, giving it substance: horned it was now, grown great in malice, and it wanted me to look directly at it, and lose my mind; or have it taken over. I felt it smile, and that was almost too much to bear, felt it beckon -- and were there words on its noisome breath, insidious, inviting words? I could see the folds of its robe, its palpable shadow. The moment stretched to impossible length, and the force was becoming irresistible. I lifted my head, unable to prevent myself.

"Painter, look away," called a voice inside my brain, speaking strangely accented Italian. It broke the spell; but in the split second before it succeeded, I saw what I had struggled not to see in all its terrible beauty. Saw, but with my short sight, not clearly: I did not succumb.

Yes, it was horned: yes, it was fanged, and clawed. But the face of a fallen angel which the creature wore, or inhabited, was the most perilous thing I have ever seen, for temptation, for risking your soul: for wanting to risk that much, and more. Then suddenly superimposed on its form was its veiled likeness, precise as the photograph it was, molded onto it. Once more came its cry, drilling through our heads, and we all clamped hands to our ears as it shrank into itself, into its image, dwindling even as the shriek died away, becoming paint once more, paint which flaked from the wall into the finest of colored dust on the floor.

My legs gave way altogether. I sagged against the wall and slid gently down it, like a drunk: the others, when they could move, helped me up and I consumed most of the contents of Enrico's hip flask before I stopped shaking.

"Thank you," I muttered, but whether I meant the two of them or the voice, which had brought me out of my dreadful compulsion, I don't know. They had not heard that voice, nor seen the chiseled perfection of the creature's beauty; but at the last had seen the thing collapsing in upon itself, finally confined by its image.

"The accent was strange," I said to Enrico, "archaic perhaps?"

His thought was the same as mine: "So it came back to Bruno della Torre, in the end."

"Or," Silvana said, "he came back to it. To finish what he began."

"It's a strong obligation," I said quietly. "Nearly six hundred and fifty years."

"Requiescat in pace," said Enrico. "There'll be no trace left in those photographs, I'll be willing to bet."

But when we looked at them I wasn't so sure. They were all faded to white, or gone to black; but faintly, so faintly I couldn't make it out with any certainty, I thought the outline of the pursuer remained.

Unless, as Silvana thinks, it was an outline imprinted on my own eyes, like a negative itself. If she is right, that too seems to have faded over the years; but I still sometimes wonder which of the images Bruno della Torre threw himself into the Arno in order to escape.

Lord Of Infinite Diversions

by t. Winter-Damon

t. Winter-Damon is a demented poet from Tucson, Arizona whose work has been described as Neo-Baudelarian-Cyber-Sade. His work has been widely published around the lunatic-fringe world of the small press and experimental magazines. In addition to his poetry, he writes a monthly review column on the surreal/experimental/underground publishing scene for Scavenger's Newsletter. Just lately Winter-Damon has decided to try his hand at writing a novel, and, in collaboration with Randy Chandler, the two have completed Duet for the Devil, first volume of The Books of the Beast trilogy -- excerpts of which have already appeared in various small press publications. No, this is not another of those fairyland-fantasy trilogies.

Lord of Infinite Diversions

(kount hymn 2 aiming thee phallen)

green jade, green jade the womb of this throne room cavern, the prince is poised magnificently upon his throne, he is a fair & well-formed youth, a youth perhaps of fifteen summers, ringlets of golden hair entwine about the beautiful cruelty of his face. Beautiful, almost effeminate his haughty decadence, his eyes compel, his eyes that are faceted chunks of amber lit from within, to stare into those eyes is entrapment eternal, certain, witness the human insects frozen deep therein... the prince is naked, not merely unclothed but naked in his perfect sin. naked as the marbling of veins & arteries & musculature laid bare for his inspection, the flayed female slaves displayed indecently upon his rack, his phallus is a rearing serpent, his wings of bone & leather tremble like the leaves of aspen at the first faint breath of winter, his excitement is so delicately understated, like the fire that dances deep within the opal, like the gilded satin of a butterfly's wing, a huge fly like a jewel is set into the ring upon his left hand, emerald & amethyst glitter upon his middle finger...

grey, all dove grey the tailored garments of the dandy, the dandy in his carefully pressed trousers & his vest & waistcoat & top hat. a ruff of lace at throat & wrists betrays the hint of white white foam, the golden fob. the golden chain, the golden timepiece, exposed, a symmetry that evokes some secret symbolism suddenly made manifest. (& as if this were surely not enough!) his face his hidden,

masked as an albatross in ivory, smooth & sensuous each perfectly carved curve, the grey man. the dandy, they are one. one who ravishes his slain lover's corpse, a woman in torn vestiges of black lace & net stockings ornamented with gold clocks, her hair is panthers' fur & jungle midnights, a black-bearded dwarf clasps her severed head between his naked thighs...

restless sea. restless sea of slowly rolling waves, sea of violet, sea of scarlet, sea of crimson...

& in the timevault the throbbing brain of Donatien Frangois drifts in its womb of glass, laved in its broth of hemoglobin & of soma. (skull of glass, hallucinating death dreams into infinity... dreams slowly rolling in a sea of blood & the piss of pirate priests & fly agaric...)

restless sea.

Rail Rider

by Wayne Alien Sallee

*Born in Chicago, Illinois on September 19, 1959, Wayne Alien Sallee still rules there as Resident Mad Writer. To date he has had published over 800 poems and stories, most of these in experimental small press magazines with very strange titles. This past year Sallee has begun to hit the Big Time, with a couple of story sales to Penthouse. In addition, Mark Ziesing Books has bought Sallee's first two books -- a 22-story collection, *Running Inside My Skin*, and a novel, *The Holy Terror*. Sallee is currently at work on a new novel, *Brotherhood of the Disfigured*.*

*"Rail Rider" originally appeared in J.N. Williamson's *Masques III*, a fine series of general horror fiction anthologies that does much to replace the loss of the *Whispers* and *Shadow* series from Doubleday. There the story had the non sequitur title, "Third Rail." Sallee explained: " 'Rail Rider' was changed to 'Third Rail' because the author's editor felt the new title would reflect the character's sexual arousal, i.e., his having an erection." I'm not sure I got that one, but here's the story under its original title.*

Clohessy watched Raine's blue Civic head back toward the Kennedy on-ramp; then he turned, zippering his jacket as he took the down escalator steps two at a time to the concourse leading to the El train. The Kennedy overpass was deserted and he stood for several minutes staring out at the eight lanes of weekend traffic -- four on each side of the Jefferson Park/Congress/Douglas rapid transit line.

Then he noticed the girl.

Before looking back at her a second time, Clohessy -- time-scheduled commuter that he was -- glanced north, saw that the train was nowhere near arriving at the terminal. He had been chilled crossing the parking lot, yet the girl below him was wearing only a pair of jeans and a white sweater that clung tight to her waist. A loose gilded belt completed the image. Clichéd as it was, she looked as if her body had been poured into her clothing. The sweater was pushed up around her elbows. Maybe he'd offer her his gloves after he'd handled business.

Clohessy walked briskly down the glass-and-stainless-steel corridor to those stairs leading to the El platform. It was after 10 P.M.; the ticket agent's booth was closed. He'd have to pay on the train and took a second to make certain he had small bills. The conductor wouldn't be able to break a twenty.

Clohessy never carried a comb, so he ran a hand through his thin blond hair (not that it would matter in the sharp late-September wind), pushed through the gate and took the down escalator. Halfway to the platform, he caught a flash of the girl's sweater, a creamy slice of arm. As cold as it was, and my, how the hair on her arms danced...

Clohessy had been disappointed to leave Raine's place so early, but he'd had a two-hour trek on public transportation to the Southwest Side ahead of him; he enjoyed Raine and Peg's company and likely wouldn't see them again until Lilah Chaney's party in Virginia next February. Yet seeing the girl on the platform made him momentarily forget the last few hours.

As Clohessy's shoes clacked onto the concrete, she turned to look at him. He met her gaze and she glanced quickly away. She did not seem concerned about whether the train was coming; she didn't seem impatient in her movements, and, after the first five minutes Clohessy had watched her from the corner of his eye, she hadn't once leaned out, over the tracks (as most people -- himself included -- usually did).

He looked at the digital clock on the Northern Trust Bank across the Kennedy: 53° at 11:09. If he was ever going to strike up a conversation with the girl, he'd have to do it now; the train would be there by quarter after.

Walking the ten or so steps to where she was standing, Clohessy jammed his fists into his pockets, realizing just as he neared her that he was wearing his spring jacket and that he'd sound pretty damn stupid offering her his gloves when he'd left them on his coat rack back in his apartment! Embarrassed, he swung away.

The platform rumbled; he turned to stare north. It was only a plane leaving from O'Hare, a mile away. Clohessy whistled tunelessly, rubbernecked. The sign above him read BOARD HERE FOR TRAINS TO LOOP & WEST SIDE. The dull white neon lines flickered. The clock at the bank now said: 52° at 11:11. A huge tanker truck obscured the red neon Mona Koni restaurant sign as it made a wide turn into the parking lot of Dominick's.

Sighing, Clohessy began watching for signs of life in one of the lighted upper floors of an office building to the far side of I-90's left lanes. When he turned again, the girl was gone. Clohessy glanced up at the escalators. From where he stood, he saw the bottom fifteen steps of the two stairwells, with the escalator in the middle, before they disappeared out of sight behind the overhead ads for Camel Filters and Salem Lights. He was still surprised by how well kept and graffiti-free the El station was.

Clohessy saw a blurred flash of color. The girl was riding the rails on the up escalator. He smiled, amazed. Slipping back into sight from above, she'd slide down nearly to the bottom before stopping, and then glide back up. Clohessy watched her straddle the moving stairwell a half dozen times, saw her ride up in a kind of swimming sidestroke. She was gorgeous.

Her sweater had hiked up over her hip, exposing more flesh. Her hair fell across her face.

She turned to stare at Clohessy, winked. He touched his collar, glanced away at the bank clock again, and too flustered even to notice the time. He looked back; again she was gone from sight.

Clohessy heard whistling and catcalls from above. Male voices. The voices came nearer, accompanied by the sound of sneakers on the concrete stairs. Clohessy calculated four separate voices, fretted for the girl. All four men wore slicked-back hair, he saw when they reached bottom; all wore lime-green fall windbreakers. Each carried a bag of some kind. They walked closer. Behind them, the girl slid back down the rail. She stared at the men, but with boredom.

Once they had reached the glare of the sodium lamps, Clohessy realized why the girl wasn't afraid of them, and, for what seemed like the twelfth time that night, he felt extremely stupid. They weren't gang members. The jackets advertised Szostak's Tavern.

The four guys were a Polish bowling team.

Within minutes, the southbound train pulled in. The bowlers got on, heading toward Milwaukee Avenue; Clohessy was certain. He glanced at the time. 11:18. Still plenty of time to catch the Archer bus downtown. He'd wait around to see what the girl was going to do. She seemed in no hurry to leave. Maybe she was waiting for Clohessy to make his move.

The southbound train was now far in the distance. The girl hadn't come back down the escalator since the train was in the station. Clohessy, inching closer to the stairwell and her, heard a shuffling sound from the concourse above. Probably her boyfriend showing --

He saw something white, lying flat on one of the escalator steps lowering to the platform. White with splashes of red.

Descending.

Red nails on a girl's hand.

Red veins at the wrist.

Descending. Catching on the edge of the platform grille and flipping up. Her hand, severed at the wrist, hideous in the green glow seeping up from the escalator's bowels. Creating a ghastly cast of shadows from her dead veins and finger joints.

Then her corpse followed, riding the rail down, lines of blood sprayed across the chrome. Her eyes, forever open, still had the bored look she had given the bowlers.

Then, also riding the rail down, toward Clohessy the man with the knife.

Archway

by Nicholas Royle

Nicholas Royle may well be the fastest rising new star among British horror writers. Born in Manchester on March 20, 1963, Royle made his Year's Best Horror Stories debut last year with the macabre tale, "Ours Now." By the time of this, his second appearance here, he has already sold more than thirty stories to such magazines and anthologies as Interzone, Fear, Fantasy Tales, Cutting Edge, Book of the Dead, Obsessions, and, among others, Reader's Digest. He is currently editing an original horror anthology, Dark-lands, which I'll be checking out for Year's Best Horror contenders.

Of course, horror writers cannot live on short fiction alone. On the novel front, Royle reports: "My first novel, Counterparts -- an examination of doubles and split personalities and bloody Australian Aboriginal ceremonial rites set against a West/East European backdrop -- is currently with agents in London and New York. I'm currently working on two novels, one a 'speculative dark fantasy' about two jazz saxophonists in a changing eastern Europe, and the other a 'horror thriller' about mass murder and mummification in contemporary London."

In respect of the weather, as she would later discover, it was a typical Archway day, the Friday that Bella moved into the flat. How terribly British of her to talk about the weather, Bella's sister wrote in reply to the letter Bella had sent a few days after moving in. Not at all like her, wrote Jan. *What did she know?* thought Bella. Jan had always sought arguments on trivial matters. Her provocations were best ignored.

She crumpled up the letter and looked out of the kitchen window. The sun was casting sharp rectangles of light on the huddled walls and buildings; large black-gray clouds moved in from the southwest like airships to obscure the light. The weather followed the same pattern every day: bright intervals followed by the intrusion of these heavy gray clouds, which were soon blown over by the ever-persistent wind. Bella had become something of a weather-watcher, it was true, but not because she responded to the Britishness of the occupation; rather, it served as a distraction.

She threw Jan's letter in the bin and crossed the kitchen. Her finger alighting on the percolator switch, she froze. There was that noise again. She'd heard it a few times that week and had been able neither to locate it, nor with any certainty

identify it. Sometimes it was like an asthmatic's wheezing, sometimes an old man's derisive laugh. Asthmatics and old men there may well have been in the upper and lower flats and on either side, but the noise sounded as though it came from within her walls. Just an acoustic trick, she assured herself, the source of which would no doubt one day soon come to light.

"There you are, then. You can have a day to think about it if you want," the landlord had said after giving his lightning tour of the flat. "But the sooner you decide the better. I don't know if you know what the present housing situation is like, but..."

"I know exactly what it's like," she interrupted him. "I've been looking for over a month and some of the places I've seen, well, I wouldn't live in them if you paid me."

"There's plenty would. Can't turn your nose up these days. Anyway, that's another matter. This is a good flat and I'll have no trouble finding someone for it. So, when can you tell me?"

Bella thought quickly. It was the first flat she'd seen which satisfied all her requirements -- self-contained, own front door, bath fitted, telephone already in, adequately furnished, ten minutes from the tube, rent just within her means provided she got the housing benefit.

"I'll take it," she said, surprised at how easy it was, not believing the search was over.

"Right. You can move in on Friday. A month's rent in advance, a month deposit. When can you let me have a reference?"

"Pardon?"

"Reference. From your employer."

"Oh, by the end of this week, I should imagine." She should be able to get it by then. In fact, the matter of a reference had slipped her mind, but it was of course essential. She remembered the miles of cards in newsagents' windows, which repeatedly stressed "No DHSS" and "Professional people only".

Bella straightened the framed photograph, which had drawn her attention.

Now at the white wall she fingered the crack. It was nothing to worry about, the landlord had said in his booming voice. But she found she was able to slide her finger into the gap -- she was sure she hadn't been able to do that before. She heard the photograph move and reached to straighten it again. The crack widened a fraction and a solid lump of darkness fell into the room. Bella stooped to pick it up but it dissolved in her hand like it was nothing. Suddenly the light in the room dimmed as black light dribbled from the crack. The crack gaped and a great absence of light seemed to pour into the room, thick and viscous like tar, yet neither liquid nor solid.

It laughed at her.

Bella rose from contemplation of her breakfast, depressed after a bad night, and straightened the photograph on the wall. As she touched the frame she felt a tug of familiarity. She didn't remember anything else until some time later when she was on her way out of the door and she heard somebody laugh where nobody could have been.

Lunch was busier than usual at the restaurant. Again she felt glad she was not a waitress, rushing around with never enough time to do all that was demanded. Bella was happier sitting at the cash desk, steadily working through hundreds of pounds and as many indecipherable bills. Not that she was content, however. The cash system at the restaurant she'd worked at before coming here had been much more straightforward, and her work as a result had been more efficient. But that restaurant had closed for refurbishment work only a couple of weeks ago; its employees effusively thanked and put out on the street. So she'd asked around and found a job here. The wages were better, which was good, now that she had the flat to pay for. As for the reference, she was sitting on it. The manageress had typed up a short note, which was now in the back pocket of Bella's jeans.

The telephone rang shrilly. It was for Marilyn. Bella called her, although she wasn't supposed to pass calls on to the staff. Not a word of thanks. But that was nothing new: these waitresses were not really disposed to friendliness. Bella regretted not having swapped numbers with the friends she'd made in the old place.

When Bella climbed out of the underground at Archway, the sky was almost completely blacked out by thick cloud, like a domed lid propped from the earth in the east by high-rise blocks silhouetted against brilliant white. As she stood at the

exit the rain began to fall, heaving heavy drops onto the litter-strewn pavement.

"It's always the way, isn't it?" she said to a middle-aged woman who slipped away, bowing her head to protect the cigarette which clung mollusk-like to her bottom lip. A tramp moved slowly through the flow of people toward the station entrance. Seeing Bella standing there he held out a hopeful hand. She turned away and walked home through the rain and dirty streets. A crowd of boys collected at the end of Fairbridge Road. They wore training shoes, jeans slashed a little way up the side seams at the ankle, Paisley shirts whose tails hung out, gold chains and expensive haircuts. The rain had stopped; the clouds fled eastward as if scared of the light, which once more seeped into the streets. Bella counted sixteen boarded-up houses on Fairbridge Road. She began to wonder at the landlord's audacity in describing this area of Upper Holloway as "desirable."

Her resolution not forgotten, Bella searched the flat for a possible source of the noise which had frightened her. She was examining the bedroom door hinges when the laughter rang out clearly from the bathroom. She ran through immediately and pulled the blind up onto its runner. The ventilator groaned as it turned in the breeze: it slowed to a wheezing trickle: then laughed as a squall sent it spinning. She leaned over the toilet to pull the cord to shut it up. Below, a face turned from Bella's direction and a figure slipped across the waste ground into the shadow of a wall. "Nosy creep," muttered Bella as she let the blind unroll back into place.

It was just an ordinary salt cellar -- metal top, glass body, almost full, a few grains of salt clinging to the downward slope of the silver top -- but Bella could not tear her eyes from it. It was safe, reassuring, and unambiguous.

She had been moving an easy chair from the living room to the bedroom and had dragged it across the bamboo curtain. The noise it produced -- like a rattling of bones -- had scared her, set her nerves on edge, even though she knew it was harmless. That being the first ambiguous sound, each new sound was exaggerated and misinterpreted. She'd positioned the chair in her bedroom and straightening up had given a little cry. But the face looking in at her had been her own. She'd pulled the curtains across and had sat down in the chair to try and relax. But the immersion heater had sighed like an old man. She'd stood up to straighten the photograph on the wall. *Hadn't she done that before?* she'd asked herself. So, she had come to the kitchen, sat down at the table and focused on the saltcellar.

At the edge of her field of vision hung the black oblong of the uncurtained

kitchen window. Orange fog loomed outside, pressing at the glass, trying to force a way in. The conversations of her neighbors, muffled through the thin walls, became sinister. A radio played in the flat above but seemed to come from within her own rooms. What could she do to remain calm? She would call someone. Who could she call? There wasn't anybody. She'd lost touch. Her sister; she'd call Jan. As she touched the receiver the telephone rang. Bella jumped back and hit her head against the wall. This was ridiculous: she was being terrorized by nothing in her own home. She collected her wits together and picked up the receiver. A man's voice asked for Deirdre, insisted that Bella was she, would not be dissuaded. Bella hung up; she would have to get the number changed. She no longer wished to use the telephone. Jan would only say she was being hysterical. She retreated to the bedroom, away from the billowing fog wiping itself over the kitchen window, and to distract herself opened a book. There was a gaping black divide in the wall, out of focus beyond the pages of the book. Bella looked up but the crack was no more than three or four millimeters wide. Tiredness was causing her to hallucinate. She undressed and got into bed.

"What do you mean you can't manage to keep my shifts open?" she asked of the manageress.

Cheryl said: "Your figures aren't balancing, Bella."

"But that's not my fault. It's the antiquated till and that stupid system. I'm sorry, but it really is a stupid system. And that business of me having to keep the waitresses' money as well. I don't know what they write on their tip cards. I'd suggest you watch some of them before giving me the sack."

"I'm sorry, Bella. Don't you think this is very difficult for me? I'm only doing what I've been told to do."

They all said that, thought Bella. Their hypocrisy had always distressed her. Don't let the staff have 'phone calls, Cheryl had said. She'd accepted her own calls though. Standing there gossiping with her friends while Bella tried to do two jobs at once. There was much about the restaurant, which was undesirable; however, Bella needed the job.

"I need the job," she told Cheryl. "You can't just get rid of me."

"I'm afraid that's the situation, Bella. We are no longer in a position where we have need of you."

It was becoming obvious that the management were not to be budged.

"Well sod you, then!" Bella shouted and stormed out of the office.

Leicester Square tube station. Northern Line. Three trains had thundered into the station and rattled out again while Bella remained seated, trying to calm her anger and nerves. Feeling a little less violent by the time the fourth train arrived, she got on. A crowded tube train was not the best place to be when feeling angry and resentful. Bella had a tendency, when in that state of mind, to misinterpret dim-witted behavior as antagonistic. And the tube was a great one for dulling the responses.

The clouds raced overhead at Archway. Bella felt insignificant beneath them. A vicious wind hurled itself along Junction Road and buffeted pedestrians emerging from the station. Bella didn't feel up to going back to the flat: she chose to walk about until she regained her calm. A tattered wretch of a man was stopping passersby and asking for money. Bella turned and walked toward Highgate Hill. Brooding was pointless, she realized. She was in a mess though. No job, no money. Think positive!: she would have to sign on the dole. There could be no immediate prospect of finding another job. She'd been lucky to get the one she'd just lost. Even if she found a vacancy, she'd be in a mess if they checked up on her reference. Why did you leave your last job? They sacked me on suspicion of dipping into the till. She wished now she had done so, if only to validate her dismissal and to give her something to show for it. She turned right into Hornsey Lane. Northbound lorries hurtled up the Archway Road under the overpass, under the Archway. The sky was re-forming: the remaining dark clouds drew together and formed a band joining the horizons. Bella felt small. She walked down the little path to the Archway Road and stood in the shadow of the Archway and felt smaller still.

She had to wait fifteen minutes before it was her turn. Yes, she wanted to sign on. Yes, she'd signed on before, but years ago, and not here. She was claiming from today and would sign on whichever day suited them. Yes, she needed to have her rent paid. Yes, she would fill in the B1 and take it to the DHSS in person rather than post it.

She took the B1 home. "Claim Supplementary Benefit on this form," it said at the top. There were eight pages of questions. The walls of the room bowed in

above her. A dull creeping light from the window hung over the mismatched furniture. A car turned a corner, but the fly, which buzzed around the lampshade, was louder. She got up to make a cup of tea and passed by the kitchen window. Down below on the patch of waste ground a figure turned its face up to her window. Bella froze to the spot. The face just stared, its eyes quite clearly defined. Bella's flesh crawled, her scalp tightened. She shivered, and a change came over the face. It became elongated as the mouth opened and formed a black triangle. Symmetrical lines deepened about the eyes and mouth, accentuating the apex at the chin and reducing the eyes to black slits. The features formed a hideous triangular mask and became fixed in that image. It was the mime artist's version of an evil sneer; malice and twisted pleasure. The person had gone when Bella looked up again.

The B1 presented its problems. "Why did you leave this job?" The walls around her began to press, the air to thicken. "What is the name and address of your landlord, landlady, or council?" Bella's temples ached. The light had deteriorated. "Is your home very difficult to heat because of things like damp or very large rooms?" Another early firework exploded outside. "Are you, or any of the people you are claiming for, pregnant? Who is pregnant?" A fly buzzed over the butter-dish. "Who is blind?" "Who needs to have extra washing done? Please tell us why. If you wash at home how many loads of washing do you do each week? How much do you think this costs you each week for washing powder, hot water and electricity? Do you, or any of the people you are claiming for, have any other illness or disability which you would like us to know about? Who is ill or disabled? What is the illness or disability? Remember that if you deliberately give false information you may be prosecuted."

"Excuse me." It was Bella speaking. "I've got a question about the B1 form you gave me yesterday. It asks for the landlord's name and address. Does this mean you'll be writing to him to check the rent paid and so on?"

"I don't know," said the girl, her hand straying to a pile of cards. "It's not us who pays you."

"Well who pays me?"

"DHSS."

"Yes, but I just want..."

"Look, if you take it to the DHSS they'll explain it for you."

"I don't need it explained. I just want to know if my landlord will be contacted. He doesn't know I'm unemployed, you see. He'd kick me out if he did."

"George." The girl leaned around the partition. "Lady wants to know if the DHSS will contact her landlord."

"Can't say. You'd have to ask them," said George, edging round to face Bella.

"Well, how do I do that? I don't want to put the form in till I'm sure. If the landlord knows, he'll kick me out. No one lets to the unemployed, you know. Not if they can help it. Scum of the earth, as far as they're concerned."

"You'd better go to the DHSS, love. Archway Tower. Tenth floor. Ask there."

On her way out of the unemployment office, bewildered and annoyed, Bella scanned the long queues static before the unforgiving windows, and a familiar face revealed itself to her from shadows. She rushed out, clutching her Bl, imagining the face grinning horribly at her back.

She hoped a bath would cheer her up and prove fortifying for her jaunt up the Archway Tower. There was nothing -- or very little -- to equal the pleasure of total immersion in hot, foamy water. And somehow the prospect seemed extra attractive in the middle of the day.

The steam condensed on the windows so that she didn't have to drop the blind and resort to artificial light. She began to ease her body gradually into the water, but experience had taught her to opt instead for immediate total submersion: it was always a shock, but you soon got used to it. She lay there for ten minutes without moving, without cares; simply enjoying the sensation of the hot water holding her body in its grasp. She brushed her palm over her thigh and thrilled at the tingling feeling produced. Her body was important; she enjoyed the indulgence of its desires. It was a long time since she'd had a man. Her hand floated between her legs. Water splashed out of the bath and onto her slippers. She trembled and lay back; the water regained its stillness; all was very quiet, so that the laughter was particularly shocking when it suddenly rattled through the ventilator. Bella jumped in fright and turned to the window. The ventilator spun and groaned. A dark shape loomed on the other side of the glass. Her first thought was simply that she'd been seen, and guilt filled her; then, as a patch of condensation cleared, she recognized the mad triangular face.

Bella took the lift to the tenth floor and made her way to enquiries. The room distressed her. Rows of benches on which slumped tired, unhappy claimants. Some tramps sat at the back with an upsetting air of permanence and propriety. All the faces in the room were devoid of hope; cheerless, lacking vitality, staring at the partitioned windows, only one of which was being used. There was no apparent queuing system, no ticket distributor, no future in hanging around, thought Bella. She did try to discover from one person whether or not there was any system, but the eyes, which turned upon her, were so empty and lifeless that Bella could not have stood waiting for an answer without loss of self-control and tears of pity and frustration.

She left the room and stood on the landing opposite the lift doors. These suddenly opened and a piteous group of people moved slowly over to the room Bella had just left -- they seemed as if drawn there on an ever shortening thread.

Over to the left Bella saw a door to another room. The door was unlocked, but the room empty. Rows of benches faced two windows above which was a sign bearing the words: "Appointment holders wait here. Your name will be called at the appointed time." You could wait here a lifetime and never have satisfaction. Here was a system supposed to care for and help those who needed it. Instead it gave you nothing. No, that wasn't true, it didn't dare give you nothing. That would be too definite, too cut-and-dried, too much like an answer to your plea. Instead it gave you the forms, the questions you didn't know how to answer, the delay before the inevitable mistake or refusal.

"It is dangerous to allow children on the window sill," read another notice underneath the window. Bella looked down and saw the people moving below, crawling like carrion flies over the shit-heap carcass of their city. There would be a poetic justice about it all -- the city getting the filth it deserved, and the flies by similar token winning their carrion -- were it not for the fact that the flies were actually people; a fact which dwindled to a possibility, easily refutable, from this ivory tower.

There was a second door on the other side of the room. Bella went through into a long, narrow room, partitioned on the left of the aisle into cubicles. Chair, glass, desk, chair; six times repeated. No people, no papers, nothing. At the end, walls and two doors sectioned off a cubicle. From within came a noise, scuffling and muffled sounds of movement. Bella beat a hasty retreat, not wishing to be apprehended where she probably was not supposed to be.

Back on the landing Bella waited for the lift to come. She looked out of the window down to the roof of the Archway Tavern where a person stood looking up at her. Even at that distance she recognized the laughing face. She swung round and nearly bumped into a man emerging from a door which could only lead to the room where she'd heard the noise. He pointed hideous grinning features at her. The lift arrived and she dived into it. The face was in the lift. She thrust her hands back through the gap and forced the doors open to let her out. She looked about wildly and saw a sign, "Fire Exit." The swing doors banged behind her and she clattered down the cold stone steps.

Her eye was drawn to the yellow stickers, which decorated the gray walls of the staircase. "ASBESTOS," she read. "This material must not be worked in any way without written permission from the PSA District Works Officer. Accidental damage should be reported immediately to line manager." Here within the skeleton of the building one became aware of the rotten core, potentially mortally dangerous; the truth to which the lift passengers, ferried up and down through the bowels and guts of the tower, remained oblivious.

Bella came out into Junction Road and was accosted by a red-faced derelict who asked her for twenty pence. She stepped aside -- he would only drink it -- and left him to the charity of wealthier pedestrians.

Twice she walked back past the church -- her mind all indecision -- before actually going in for the Friday evening service. Her parents had brought her up to believe. She hadn't set foot inside a church, however, for as long as she could remember. The faces around her were solemn, the service also. She'd come for solace -- there was little enough to be found elsewhere -- and ended up condemning her naiveté in thinking that the old lie, if believed in, might help when other sources couldn't. When she came out of the church, the sharp pointed face on the other side of the road laughed at her before retreating into the shadows of a dark alleyway. She was made to feel humiliated for trespassing where she didn't belong, like a wounded soldier seeking help in the enemy camp. Guilt followed close upon this shame and she was unable to shake it off, even when home with the doors locked and blinds down. Solitary in her prison she felt threatened from without: lonely yet not alone.

Loneliness had proved the stronger and Bella had wrapped herself up in a warm coat and gone out. She'd found one pub off Holloway Road, which wasn't, as the others had appeared to be, colonized by drunken Irishmen. She'd made herself be congenial and had accepted the offer of a drink, which a man called Brian

Monkton had made her.

"These are my friends here. Colleagues really," said Monkton. "We're journalists."

"Right," said Bella. "I've never met any journalists before, I don't think."

"Well, I hope you like us. We're going to a party soon. Not far from here. You can come too if you like."

"Thanks, I think I will."

"What do you do, then? Sorry, what's your name again?"

"Bella."

"Bella. That's right. Lovely name. So, anyway, Bella, what do you do?"

She felt unable to admit she was unemployed. It might be a stigma among these journalists, whose company was better than none.

"I work in the restaurant business."

"Oh right, what, waitress?"

"Yes, well no, cashier. Nearly the same thing. But a bit different." Her words trailed off, confused, but it didn't matter: Monkton didn't appear to be paying much attention to what she was saying. He was looking where her T-shirt hinted at the divide between her breasts. Didn't men realize, she wondered, that women know exactly where their eyes are looking? Maybe they did and they thought women liked it. Could they really be that stupid? She supposed they could -- but their intelligence needn't concern her tonight. There would be a party: she could meet people, have a few drinks, relax, forget her worries, and forget that mocking face that seemed to be following her about. The man was talking to her:

"Come on, then, er, Bella. Everyone's here. We can go."

They walked in a large group north up Holloway Road. The night was crisp; Bella pulled her collar up. Cars sped by, burning trails of light onto her retinas; the occasional bus, its steamed-up windows yellow rectangles. A few Asian-owned grocery shops still spread their fruit and vegetables out onto the pavement. A tramp curled himself into a ball in a shop doorway as they walked past on their way to a party. Bella felt a twinge of guilt, but reminded herself that she had troubles of her own and this would help her forget them for a while, might even make them go away, one never knew.

A man with long hair in a ponytail, who had introduced himself as Terry, passed a rolled and lighted cigarette to Bella. She took it between thumb and index finger and inhaled deeply. Too deeply, it seemed, for she shuddered a little as she held the smoke in her lungs. Her head swam as she exhaled. Terry was talking to her about his new play, about schematic problems he was having with act three; but she wasn't a very attentive listener. She'd drunk several glasses of wine, three cups of tea (of very dubious content), and had shared three, or was it four, cigarettes. Anyway, Terry didn't seem to be aware of her inattentiveness; he watched his fingernails as he spoke. He didn't seem to hear when she excused herself to go to the toilet. She looked back from the doorway and saw that he retained the same position, and his lips appeared still to be moving -- she giggled and left the room.

The hall was even more congested than the room she'd just left. She managed to pick her way through people sitting on the floor and reach the stairs. The toilet was on the first floor and amazingly there was no queue. She locked the door, pushed her jeans and briefs down, and took a seat. It was good to go, a relief. She wondered if Terry was still talking to his nails. She might not have seen it if it hadn't moved: in the corner to her right, almost hidden by curtains, a disfigured triangular face caught the light with a slight movement. Bella screamed and leapt to her feet, tugging at her jeans. The creature was laughing at her back, she knew, as she yanked the door open and fled downstairs, over the heads in the hall, and out the front door.

She didn't have her coat but wouldn't go back in; she'd come and retrieve it another time. Digging her hands deep in the pockets of her jeans, she trudged homeward. She didn't have far to walk but the cold bit through her thin sweater, making her shiver. The party had been a mistake: she remembered the derelict they'd strode past on Holloway Road and flushed with guilt.

As she turned a corner, she caught a glimpse of someone behind her on the other side of the road. The pursuer drew level on the opposite pavement and kept pace with her. She glanced across and her heart leapt onto her tongue. The grinning head bobbed on a black-clad body, scarcely visible in the dark, which pranced with a lunatic's gaiety. The face turned to her, glowing under the orange lamps, but glowing yellow, and not just the face, the whole head. Sobriety had returned, thanks to the cold, so what caused the apparition of this grinning dancing demon? There must have been something in the tea; those had looked like very big tea leaves, if leaves at all, at the bottom of her cup. She was hallucinating; that's why

the dancing head glowed yellow under the orange lights, which killed color; it wasn't the source of its own light, but the product of whatever drugs Bella had consciously or unconsciously consumed.

Still the head kept pace with her, teetering above its stalk-like body, despite the advance of her rationale. If she turned a corner, it turned also, but kept the same distance between them. A thought fluttered around her skull: was the thing being cautious in not approaching?: was it content to laugh from a safe distance? Deciding to risk it, Bella dived into a narrow passageway, which she had used in daylight as a shortcut. She denied herself the luxury of looking back and so didn't perceive that she was being pursued until she heard footsteps approaching at speed. They didn't stop at a respectful distance behind her. A hand clamped down on her shoulder and she wheeled round.

"Oh, God!" It was Monkton from the pub. "What are you playing at? You terrified me."

"Sorry," said the newcomer, breathing alcohol through the mist into her face. "I didn't think. But then I'm hardly in a state to be thinking. You left so suddenly. Good party. Why d'you leave?"

"I, er... I had a headache, needed some air," Bella said, looking over Monkton's shoulder but seeing nothing in the orange mist.

"Right. Well. You going home, then? Got far to go? Can't let you go on your own."

Monkton was eager and Bella would be glad of company, in the general sense if not the particular. The threat she felt from the face seemed to have grown since its disappearance and replacement by Monkton.

"Thanks," she said. "It's not far."

* * *

One thing had led to another. Bella's gratitude to Monkton for walking her home, not fully expressed, for she couldn't tell him about the face; and Monkton's assumption that Bella would be grateful to him for looking after her. She'd invited him to come in and offered him the choice of cold beer or black coffee. He'd chosen beer, so she took two beers out of the fridge, thinking, what the hell, she was lonely. "Don't worry about it, Brian," Bella had tried to comfort him. "You've had a lot to drink."

"It's not the damn drink," he'd said sharply.

The delay had been caused by Monkton's inability to come, despite his sustained erection. Since he didn't immediately put the blame on Bella, as she imagined most men would if they thought they could get away with it, she reasoned that it must have been a continuing problem, which Monkton was aware of and duly upset by. Bella was determined not to let the episode be a total failure. Her aggression hadn't worked, so she would invite a change in the balance of power. She cajoled Monkton to rise above the problem and by so doing end it. He had sat astride her and entered, no less firm in his intention than before. If he'd kept his eyes closed it might have been all right, but he'd opened them to sneak a look. The uncovered window was above the head of the bed. Watching through half-closed eyes Bella knew Monkton had seen someone watching him from the opposite pavement. Laughing at him.

"Bastard," shouted Monkton.

Bella knew. She only opened her eyes properly because she was supposed to. Dismay welled up inside her. A twitching insinuation of complicity plucked at her mind, born out of a responsibility felt. This must have read on her face: it was the only explanation for Monkton hitting her, as he did, three times across the face.

"You don't fuck with me!" he shouted. "Nobody fucks with me!" How one's real face showed itself. "Laughing at me. Bitch! Don't laugh at me!" he added with venom as he clambered from the bed and reached for his clothes. Bella felt consciousness disintegrating. She heard him mutter thickly about her not having seen the last of him, as he left the flat with a slamming of doors. Pulling herself over, she looked out of the window: the man who'd hit her marched away, otherwise the street was deserted.

The crack in the wall opened wider than before and seemed to drown the room with its absence. Bella turned to the window. Tarpaulins stretched over skips drooped tails, which were derelicts whose coats flapped as they congregated to watch her. Through the lifeless mob a vital angry presence stalked. It was only a matter of time before he stepped through the divide in the wall on a mission of vengeance for his useless erection.

Bella walked the streets looking for a job. No one needed a cashier. One restaurant offered her part-time dishwashing, which she refused. Back on Holloway Road a tramp asked her to help him with his bus fare so he could get to

hospital. She brushed it aside, as she had all previous requests. But once imprisoned in the orange misty darkness of the side streets, she felt guilty. She shouldn't have turned down the job; she should have helped the tramp. Society and its governing powers wouldn't help him -- on her shoulders she felt their absolved responsibility weighing heavily, like the pound coin in her pocket. She would turn back and look for the tramp to give him what little she had, but the sharp report of footsteps reverberated in her wake. It could be anyone. Or it could be Monkton, angry after his humiliation, seeking revenge, the only way masculine aggression knew how. She took a circuitous route and lost her pursuer, if indeed there had ever been one.

Bella no longer trusted the veneer of reality, which had once sufficed to seduce her into belief, acceptance, and submission. Within a week she saw its corners turning up, patches worn thin, like an old photograph on a book cover. She went back to the Archway Tower. The streets were crawling with derelicts, they were multiplying, the world was spinning its last; what about the other people around me, she questioned, is it ending for them as well?

She pushed past a tramp choosing his dinner from a dustbin, and stepped onto the platform of a bus. She sat upstairs and watched the pavement creep by. A one-legged tramp hauled himself through the crowds on crutches. The bus stood for an age at traffic lights. The Tower loomed ahead, poking its head into the slate roof of clouds. Bella got off and walked. Footsteps resounded at her back: she stopped and turned and an anonymous swarm of people surged past her. She turned back again and watched the ground as she walked. Into her field of vision came a man beneath whose army greatcoat only one foot showed, and that didn't touch the ground. Now it did; now it didn't. His crutches echoed like nails in shoes. Abruptly he swung round on his metal sticks and extended a begging hand in Bella's direction. But she felt threatened and couldn't even bring herself to look at him. All she saw as she skirted his crutches and left him hanging there were the tattered military ribbons on his greatcoat.

She stood outside the Tower and gazed up at its vastness. The B1 was in her pocket, but any meaning it may have once had no longer existed. The door swung open easily beneath her hand. She scorned the hypocrisy of the lifts and found the staircase. Footsteps followed her up the stairs, stopping when she did, they were her own. She needn't fear footsteps in any case; only herself, her own worst enemy.

Out of breath at the ninth floor, she rested her forehead against the whitewashed plastered wall. Her own footsteps still reverberated around the

corners. Beneath her hand in the wall she felt a crack, which opened, at her touch. Black spilled onto the white and the footsteps grew louder. "Accidental damage should be reported immediately to line manager." The crack gaped ever wider. Bella fled upstairs and banged through the swing doors on the tenth floor. A door across the landing stood open; she ran to it and into a familiar room. Empty of people, filled with benches, vacant counter windows and one solitary chair. "Report to receptionist ten minutes after your appointment time if your name has not been called." The door on the other side of the room opened and into the room came a man wearing a sober suit and a grinning triangular mask for a face. Bella groped for the chair and propelled it at the window. The area of impact splintered and she climbed onto the window ledge, kicking at the glass. "It is dangerous to allow children on the window sill."

She had to find him -- not that he was of any particular importance -- but she would be able to impose a token amount of order, to put one little thing right. She couldn't hope to solve anything, but could maybe purge a little of her guilt. It seemed to her that if she could remove a part of the guilt, there being still time, she might wipe some of the smile from the laughing face.

There were so many derelicts, however, so many homeless, she could look forever. Dragging her shattered leg impeded her, all the more so for the lack of support in her spine, which she estimated to have snapped in three places. Instinct drew her on. Loss of blood onto the pavement was alarming pedestrians, but she could neither stop nor hide in a doorway.

Fifty yards away she caught sight of his back. His crutches glinted in the harsh sunlight; his foot scuffed the ground uselessly. She dug into her pocket for coins, but her hand sank into a raw gash. She knew as she tore her hand free of the muscle that it was too little too late. The tramp turned round and raised a crutch in defense. She knew what face she would see if she looked, even though it didn't belong there. So she wouldn't validate its existence by looking; she wouldn't give it the pleasure. Instead, she would have the last laugh and accept the responsibility. She tore at her own eyes with her nails and blood ran into the hollows of her cheeks, accentuating the geometry described by the two bloody sockets in relation to the smashed hanging jaw.

The Confessional

by Patrick McLeod

Patrick McLeod was born in Gainesville, Texas in 1944, went to school mostly in Texas and Louisiana, and received his Ph.D. in English from Rice University in 1973. Since then he has been teaching at Jacksonville University in Florida, where he introduced the first courses in science fiction and fantasy ever taught there. McLeod writes: "This coming semester I am teaching a Freshman Honors course in Comp & Lit which begins with Frankenstein, includes The Sirens of Titan, and concludes with Batman: The Dark Knight Returns. My more traditional colleagues tolerate me fairly well."

Until about three years ago McLeod's writing had been confined to "the usual literary papers and criticism that scarcely anyone ever hears or reads except for other bored academics." Since then he has been trying his hand at writing fiction, and has produced eleven stories and about two hundred pages of a novel. "The Confessional" is his first published story.

Fr. Thompson belched slightly as he made a half-genuflection in the general direction of the altar. The sour taste of scotch rose up to burn the back of his throat as he crossed the sanctuary and headed down the side aisle of the church toward the confessional. He fumbled discreetly through the pockets of his cassock, feeling for the breath freshener as he glanced over the nearly empty pews to ascertain the number of penitents he might expect.

Not too many (thank God), he sighed, and felt a twinge of guilt at the thought. It was early Saturday evening, and he would be hearing confessions for an hour and a half. Since St. Catherine's was an urban church, buried and half-forgotten in the growing ghetto of the old city, the weekend evening was the only practical time for its diminishing number of parishioners to name their sins to the pastor and seek his blessing. They didn't have time to spare the rest of the week, thought Fr. Thompson wryly, or the inclination.

There was only a handful of penitents scattered here and there -- some kneeling, others sitting patiently. Most of them he recognized at a quick glance as he approached the door to the confessional on the side aisle. Not one of those present was under the age of thirty, he knew. Hell, not even forty. He easily dismissed any guilt he might have felt this time. He was a minister to the middle-aged and old, and he resented it. These people didn't need him. They wanted only

reassurance and security, and he wasn't in the business of selling those particular commodities. Not at St. Catherine's, anyway. Another housing project or two, and the church itself would probably have to go.

He played with the little container of spray mist in his pocket as he reached with his other hand for the door handle to the priest's receptacle. Once inside, he thought with bitter irony, and a little squirt would forgive his evil breath and banish all evidence of the liquor he needed to fortify himself for the weekly ordeal of hearing other people's wickedness. A touch of the finger, a whiff of sugar sweetness, and he was almost good as new. God help me, he prayed, not for the first time.

Just as he was entering the confessional, he heard a noise at the back of the church which caused him to hesitate a moment. Looking back over the wooden pews and down the central nave, he could see a heavy-set man outlined against the twilight, itself framed by the heavy oaken doors of the church entranceway. As they swung to, the figure advanced haltingly into the dim lighting and stopped at the holy water fount. He stood there, eyeing the marble basin as though unsure of its function there or perhaps his own. It took a moment for Fr. Thompson to recognize him.

He had never seen him before in the church. His wife and daughter always came by themselves. Occasionally, over the years, the priest had seen them together outside at various places in the neighborhood, the man and his daughter. The wife was seldom with them. Once the priest had even taken the liberty of introducing himself. The man had seemed unimpressed at the time. On this evening's news, however, his grief had made his face almost unrecognizable on television, like those of non-celebrities usually are. The cameras had only been cursory in their glimpses of him anyway, much preferring the scene of the tragedy itself and the familiar comments of police and newscasters. Parents are too stunned in such circumstances for good press, and they won't stand still for the cameras. But Fr. Thompson had recognized him anyway.

Jesus Christ, he now muttered silently, and stepped quickly into the darkness of the confessional box. He sank back into the heavy cushioned chair, automatically raising the atomizer to his mouth, and listened for the approach of the penitents on either side. Not Arceneaux, he implored. Please God, not Arceneaux. He tried to listen for the big man's footsteps, but they were lost in the shuffle of those moving through the wooden benches and down the aisles to take their turn at the penitent's window on either side of him.

For the next thirty minutes, Fr. Thompson went through the usual Saturday

evening routine. Leaning back with his head propped in one hand, he would slide the wooden grate aside and incline himself slightly toward the voice, which would drone automatically the formula of repentance. "Bless me, father, for I have sinned...." The purple curtain between him and the sinner stirred slightly with the expelled litany of offenses, by now so deadeningly dull and trivial to the priest's ears that he grew angry at their plaintive insistence. His parishioners as a whole, at least those who bothered to come to him, were so bereft of comfort and imagination that they were incapable of real sin. He heard over and over again the same petty self-denunciations of the men. I drank too much, I cursed and used God's name in vain, I slapped the wife around again, I looked at dirty magazines and played with myself, I missed Mass last Sunday because I was hung over. The women's confessions sounded more like complaints: I had to sneak some groceries when I went shopping because we've been so low on money, my husband and I had a quarrel because I didn't want to do it with him I was so tired and all and I'm still afraid of getting pregnant again, I used the diaphragm when we had sex because I don't know what else I can do I certainly can't have no more children, I get so angry I don't know what to do.

For all of them Fr. Thompson had the same prescription he had doled out weekly over the past ten years. Try to be a good Catholic, try to remember that God and his Blessed Mother love you, and say three Our Father's and three Hail Mary's. And while the person on the other side of the fluttering curtain would rattle out the perfunctory Act of Contrition, Fr. Thompson would raise his hand in blessing and murmur his own part of the ritual. "I absolve you of your sins, in the name of the Father and of the Son...." Dear God, he thought wearily, staring numbly into the darkness of his cubicle, what an absolute travesty. He needed a drink.

The kneeling bench on the far side of the confessional groaned suddenly and the thin partition separating the priest from the person on the other side shook slightly as though it were being leaned against. The priest immediately knew who it was. The dread he felt on seeing the man at the church door had been misplaced, but not really forgotten, over the past thirty minutes. More than ever, thought Fr. Thompson as he pushed the small-latticed grate aside from the hanging veil, he wanted that drink.

The man on the other side had only partially pulled the curtain together behind him, and from the light seeping in Fr. Thompson could discern more than the usual gray outline. From the other side, the priest was practically invisible, a dark blur at best. The kneeling man said nothing for a moment or two, but his head kept moving back and forth as though he were trying to isolate the priest from the

darkness, which concealed him. As Fr. Thompson leaned forward, he caught the beery smell of the man's breath, like the memory of last call in a two a.m. bar.

"Is that you, Fr. Thompson?"

"Yes, Mr. Arceneaux. Are you here to make your confession?" returned the priest hopelessly.

"You knew it was me, huh?" came the reply. "Can you see me or what? How'd you know?" He gave the priest a moment and continued, "I can hardly see you. How come?"

"I saw you in the doorway earlier, Louis," the priest said carefully, "when I was coming down the aisle here."

"Why do you call me Louis, huh? What gives you the right? You don't know me." Before the priest could answer, he went on, "What do I call you? Thompson? Father?" He made a feeble snort. "That's a joke, isn't it? You and me are probably the same age or so. How old are you anyway?"

"Mr. Arceneaux," the priest tried feebly, "this is a confessional. Why are you here?"

"Come on. I asked you a simple question. How old are you?"

"Forty-five," he sighed.

"I got a couple on you then," said the big man. "The white hair fooled me." He paused a moment, as if assimilating the information. "That still don't make you a father though, does it? A father has a child. Like I did." He was silent again before her name choked out of him in a half-sob. "My Anna Marie."

The priest sat still.

Arceneaux shifted his weight on the other side, and the confessional box shuddered with the effort.

"You knew my Anna Marie, Thompson?"

After a moment's hesitation came the quiet reply. "She talked to me occasionally."

"Yeah, I know she did. She used to say she liked you, her and her mother." There was the sound of despair in his feeble laugh. "What did she tell you anyway?"

The priest tried to suppress the chill he felt. He could see the bulky shape of the man's heaving shoulders.

"Are you here to make your confession, Mr. Arceneaux?" he said desperately, finally giving way to the faint shudder he had felt coming on.

"Yes, I am." The man had looked up with the words, and the priest was once again assaulted by the stench of his breath.

"Do you remember how to begin?" he offered, trying to stomach his distaste.

"Oh yeah," replied Arceneaux, again with a weak snort, "oh yeah." He shifted again on the tiny pew, which creaked its protest, and Fr. Thompson could see him turn aside and reach into his pocket for something. When he had settled again, the ritual began.

"Bless me, father, for I have sinned. I don't know how long it's been since my last confession." He was quiet for a moment. "It don't matter anyhow."

Fr. Thompson didn't want to look at the bulky, indistinct form on the other side of the small curtain. He put his hand to his head, shielding his eyes while he looked straight ahead into the darkness of his own compartment.

"You see," continued the voice only a foot or two away, "I'm gonna kill myself in just a minute or two. So what the hell does it matter?"

The priest didn't move, nor did he say anything. At another time he might have been frightened or shocked or angry. Now he was only weary. Nothing in human nature could surprise him any more.

"Don't you believe me, Thompson?" the man went on. "I mean it. Can you see what I got here?" There was the sound of something heavy shaken against the open latticework. "This is a .38 magnum, man. There ain't goin' to be nothing left of my face when I'm through."

The priest remained silent, and waited.

"Don't you want to know why? Or maybe you're too scared yourself. Think I might kill you too, is that it?" When there was no reply, the man bellowed at him, "Listen to me!"

"I am," the priest said quietly. "Try to keep your voice down, please. You'll alarm the others in the church."

"To hell with them. They'll have plenty to be alarmed about in a second." He

was breathing quickly. "I killed her, Thompson. My own baby." The priest could hear the struggle in his voice to catch the sobs before they spilled out. "I didn't strangle her, I mean. I didn't murder her. But I killed her all the same. I ruined her."

He no longer bothered to implore the priest's attention.

"She was my own little girl, always was. And she was so beautiful. I couldn't help touching her and holding her and kissing her, even when she was a little baby. She was the only pretty thing in my life."

"Please, Mr. Arceneaux," the priest tried to interrupt him, "you don't need to do this."

"This is my confession, Father," the man spat out bitterly. "My last confession! Don't you want to hear it? Don't you want to know why I'm going to blow my brains out here so I'll make sure I go to hell?"

I know why, the priest wanted to shout back all of a sudden. I know it all. More than you. Instead, he tried to reason, repeating futilely, "You don't have to do this. You must not do this thing."

Arceneaux ignored him. "From the time she was thirteen, Thompson, I was doing it to her. I couldn't help myself. I would cry afterwards right in front of her, and I'd buy her things, trying to make it up to her. Only how can you -- ?" He broke off momentarily. "Her bitch of a mother never figured it out. The old cow was jealous of her own daughter.

Claimed I was spoiling her." He made a noise that tried to be a laugh. "Spoiling her!

"I didn't choke her to death last night in the park, Thompson, but I drove her there to whatever bastard did. All those times, and she was my own little girl."

The priest was looking through the veil now at the heaving shoulders. He could smell the sweaty head pressed against the tiny barrier between him and the grieving father. He didn't look away this time when the man raised his head, but he couldn't really make out the features.

"You know how old she was, Father?" It was only the second time Arceneaux had called him by that spurious title. "Seventeen. And now she's gone." He didn't break down this time. "So why should I go on? Can you tell me that, priest?"

Mr. Thompson swallowed slowly. "Mr. Arceneaux, the man who murdered

your daughter is a monster. You are not. You are just a man, a weak man who -- "

He was abruptly interrupted. "You know what the cops told me? They said there was a 'possibility' she had been sexually molested by whoever killed her. Sexually molested! A 17-year-old girl, my little baby." He pressed his face against the wooden grille between him and the priest. "How could they tell, Thompson, when I'd... been with her that very morning? You tell me that, huh?" And he began to cry again.

The priest could feel the vomit rising up, but he forced it back. The aftertaste of burnt scotch singed his sinuses.

"You are innocent of your daughter's death, Mr. Arceneaux. You have made your confession of the other. Please! Don't take this any further."

The big man suddenly wiped his face with a handkerchief he had produced from a side pocket, one hand nevertheless still hanging heavy at his side. The priest tried to find his eyes through the veil.

"God will -- " started Father Thompson tentatively. He didn't finish.

"To hell with this," muttered the kneeling man and quickly raised the other hand to his mouth. The priest caught a glint of the metal off the faint light through the curtains behind him just before the gun exploded. There was only a small flash, but Arceneaux's head flew back from the impact and his body slammed against the interior paneled side of the confessional before slumping to its rest.

The body was wheeled down the side aisle on the ambulance stretcher, but the police photographers were still busy taking the necessary pictures at the scene while the forensics people completed the details of their work. Fr. Thompson sat slumped in one of the pews a few feet away from the activity around the confessional. Lt. Smoak edged himself down the bench in front and sat, half-turned, where he could talk to the priest.

For what he had been through, thought the lieutenant, the priest looked remarkably calm. But of course, he was probably not unfamiliar with death. It was as much a part of his profession as it was the policeman's.

The priest's hands were pressed together between his knees and buried in the folds of the black cassock while his eyes studied the floor at his feet. He still had the long violet cloth around his neck -- a stole, it was called, Smoak remembered quite inadvertently from his own Catholic childhood. He noticed that the ends were

bloodstained from when the priest had been kneeling over the body, administering the church's last sacraments as the police had arrived. Extreme Unction they were called, Smoak remembered again, and marveled at the powers of association. He thought he had just about forgotten everything connected with his dim Catholic childhood, but now the recollections came rushing back like the turn of an evening tide. He hadn't stepped foot in a Catholic church since he escaped the nuns at the end of elementary school, but this one smelled just like the ones back then, musty and sweet.

At the lieutenant's approach, Fr. Thompson looked up and pulled his hands from between his knees. Smoak could see that the fingers, like the ends of the stole, were stained with dry blood.

"I'm Lieutenant Smoak, Fr. Thompson," he offered, "from Homicide." He didn't offer to shake hands.

"Thank you for keeping the press people outside, Lieutenant. They don't belong in here." The priest gave the church an exhausted look. "It's seen quite enough, don't you think?"

Smoak ignored the last question. "That was Sgt. McNally's work, Father. I just got here." The priest shrugged, so the lieutenant got right to his business. "I hate to go through this again with you so soon, Fr. Thompson, but what more can you tell me about what's happened here than you told the sergeant? Why did this Arceneaux kill himself here of all places? And in confession?"

The priest smiled wanly. "You know what I would like more than anything right now, Lieutenant?" He didn't wait for a reply. "A double J&B on the rocks. That would be nice."

The policeman only looked at him, and so the priest asked, "What do you know about Catholics, Lieutenant Smoak?"

"Nothing," he lied.

The priest looked past him toward the confessional. "As I told your subordinate, Lieutenant, Mr. Arceneaux came to confess his sins and to kill himself. I tried to talk him out of it -- killing himself, that is -- " (there was a painful grimace) "but he wouldn't listen." His gaze tailed back to the floor. "That's all I can tell you."

"You can't say what he was confessing, or why he wanted to do it?"

The priest looked directly at his questioner. "You probably know as much as

I am able to tell you. It was his daughter you found last night in the municipal park. Anna Marie Arceneaux. A 17-year-old girl raped and murdered, then dumped like garbage in a city park. The man was in despair, Lieutenant."

"Did he tell you she'd been raped?"

When the priest refused to answer, Smoak went on.

"We hadn't told him that, Father. When we talked to him last night, we only said it was a possibility -- that's all. Now why would he be so sure of it?"

"Oh, come on!" replied Fr. Thompson angrily. "It's fairly obvious, isn't it? The girl had no underclothes on. What else was a father to think?"

"We didn't tell him that either, about her bra and panties."

The priest smiled grimly. "You're a good cop, aren't you, Lt. Smoak? You think you know all the answers."

"No, I don't know all the answers. What I do know is that in the past year we've had three young girls around here raped and murdered, probably by the same man. His method stinks of it." It felt good to the policeman to let his own anger show a bit. He didn't like the smug righteousness of the priest. "What's more, talking to the Arceneaux girl's friends this morning, it seems some of them thought the old man might have been showing her something more than fatherly affection. You get my drift?"

The priest nodded, looking back wearily toward the side where the crime experts were wrapping up their work and packing their tools.

"Furthermore, one of the other victims and the Arceneaux girl knew one another. In fact, they were in the same class. The first girl we found lived around here but went to another school." He lowered his voice, but his hand gripped the back of the prayer bench tightly. "It's beginning to fit together, Father. That's what I'm saying. And yeah, I'm a good cop. I do my job, even when it stinks like this one."

"All right," said the priest, pulling his gaze back to the lieutenant, "But you must also realize that I'm a priest. I do my job too, some of it over there." He nodded toward the confession box. "I can't expect you to understand this right now, but I am not at liberty to divulge anything I am told in the privacy of the confession. Whatever Louis Arceneaux said to me in there is now between him and God. I'm sorry."

Much to Fr. Thompson's surprise, the lieutenant only nodded. "I remember," he said. "The Seal of the Confessional, isn't it called?" While the priest continued to look at him, Lt. Smoak took a cursory glance around the church. "I was raised a Catholic, Father. Thought I had forgotten it all." He turned back and smiled wanly at his listener. "I guess you never can quite forget it all, huh."

"No, you can't."

Lt. Smoak pushed himself away from the bench and rose to his feet. "I'll be talking to you again, Father. I appreciate your time here, and I apologize if I pushed a bit. I just sometimes get a bit sick of my job."

The priest got up slowly. "I know what you mean, Lieutenant. So do I." He didn't move toward the aisle as his eyes searched the lieutenant's. "The three murdered girls," he said slowly, "they all belonged to my parish. Did you know that?"

"Not really. I hadn't even considered it. What are you trying to tell me?"

The priest swallowed slowly, trying to control his emotion, but the lieutenant was too much the professional not to read the man's grief as he struggled for words.

"In a sense, Lt. Smoak, they were my children too. They called me Father."

The two men moved toward the side aisle.

"Thanks again for your time, Father." The lieutenant hesitated, running his tongue over the corner of his lip. The priest stood there. "Can you give me anything else at all about what Arceneaux told you? Anything? We'll probably be able to wrap it up ourselves from here on out, but I'd like to be a little more sure for starters."

The white-haired man with the Roman collar and the purple vestment round his neck looked back at the police officer. Shaking his head slowly, he reached out to shake hands when he noticed the caked blood on his fingers.

"I hadn't noticed before," he said, abruptly dropping his hand. Again, he seemed to be searching for the right words while the policeman waited.

"I can tell you this, Lieutenant," he went on after a moment, "and I hope it helps. I... think... you'll have no more of these crimes here. It's in God's hands now."

Lt. Smoak nodded. "Thank you, Father." He took another look around the church and started toward the entrance, leaving behind the priest who continued to stare at the anonymous figure outlined in chalk at the foot of the confessional.

Once inside his rooms in the small rectory attached to the church, Fr. Thompson loosened the collar around his neck and went to the desk where he kept the scotch. He had taken to locking the liquor in the bottom drawer because of Mrs. Cybulski. Though he had told her she need not bother with his room -- he could take care of it and the adjoining bathroom -- she would hear nothing of the offer. She had been minding the rectory and the church for thirty years, she told him, and she'd never heard of a priest taking care of himself like that. He had too many other things to do. So he gave up trying and just locked the bottles in the drawer. He also took care of the empties so as not to upset the good woman.

The first deep swallow was from the bottle itself. Then he filled the small tumbler from the adjoining bathroom and sat down at the desk while the sweet sting of the liquor worked its magic.

Earlier as the police had been leaving the church, Mrs. Cybulski pushed her way through the assembled reporters and small crowd of curious on-lookers. Without a word from him, she produced a heavy ring of keys and started to lock up the church.

"Thank you, Mrs. Cybulski," he had whispered to her before turning to the press and television cameras.

"It's a sin, is what it is, Father," she declared loudly, "that you should have to deal with this." She glared at the small group assembled below the priest on the concrete steps.

"It's all right now," he tried to soothe her. "If you'll just lock up, I'll take care of this shortly."

"I still say it's wrong," she had replied before disappearing into the church.

The questions and interviews had continued for nearly twenty minutes until the arrival of Monsignor Heavenrich from the bishop's office enabled Fr. Thompson to dismiss the reporters. Another thirty minutes followed with the bishop's man in the rectory office, going over details and diocesan policy in regard to police business and the press. In the meantime the answer machine fielded the phone calls.

At each message Fr. Thompson had dreaded hearing the voice of Mrs. Arceneaux, but she never called. Tomorrow he would have to talk to her, no way out of it. God almighty, he kept thinking all the while Heavenrich was there, God almighty.

He went over what he had told the police lieutenant about the confession, and the monsignor nodded sympathetically. "It's the kind of situation we all think about and study in seminary," Heavenrich remarked. "The dilemma of the confessional seal! But we don't think it will ever happen to us."

"Do you know the Hitchcock movie?" he asked after a moment. When Fr. Thompson only stared dully at him, the younger man went on. "I Confess, with Montgomery Clift. A priest hears a murderer's confession who then tries to frame him for the crime. Did you ever see it?"

"I don't like the movies," Fr. Thompson had replied quietly. The monsignor then concluded his business quickly.

In the silence of his upstairs room, Fr. Thompson now tried to still his mind. He glanced at the folded letter to the bishop he had worked on this afternoon, requesting a change of parish. He hated St. Catherine's, and now things were out of hand. Unless he got a transfer, they could end only one way.

He poured a little more into the empty glass and stared at the small footlocker at the bottom of the bed. It had been with him since his first assignment as a priest, seven parishes and four counties ago. Twenty-one years in all. Somewhere along the way, he had taken to storing the records of his accomplishments in the insignificant black trunk, the press clippings from the religion sections of various papers and the small parish pamphlets which tracked his progress to what he once was sure would be the bishop's office. A long time ago that seemed now. Just when those dreams died and the others started, he wasn't sure. But there were records. The footlocker told everything. What a confessional it would make, he thought drunkenly as he set the empty glass on his desk and started fumbling for the key chain in his pocket.

He lurched over and stumbled to his knees in front of the small black trunk, strands of hair hanging in his eyes as he worked the tiny key into its inconsequential lock. He pulled at the clasps on either side and pushed the lid open, pitching forward with the movement. He caught himself in time, but the white collar came loose from his neck and fell on the bra and panties lying on top. He tossed it aside and picked up the girl's underclothes.

He paid no attention to the tawdry photographs, the lurid magazines, the yellowed news clippings, or even the other girls' things lying in the footlocker. He knew he should get rid of all of them someday, but he was never able to bring himself to do it. Just as he had hoped there would be no more victims after the last one. He always hoped that, but God never heard him. All he ever really wanted was to help, to reassure them, to show them that he cared more than anyone else. But God had damned him, and he was lost until he found his own peace.

Fr. Thompson buried his coarse face in Anna Marie Arceneaux's delicate underthings and sobbed. "I'm sorry," he cried to no one in particular. "I'm so sorry. I won't let it happen again."

It was a familiar ritual, with no absolution at the end.

The Deliverer

by Simon MacCulloch

Simon MacCulloch was born in Edgware, North-West London on April 22, 1960, and has lived there ever since, working since age 19 for the Department of Social Security. While "The Deliverer" is his first published piece of fiction, MacCulloch has for some time been contributing articles and reviews to such magazines as Fear, The British Fantasy Newsletter, Dagon, Skeleton Crew, Iniquities, and The Blood Review. He has short stories forthcoming in Fear, Aklo, and Fantasy and Terror. Aside from his lifelong interest in supernatural fiction, MacCulloch professes a consuming passion for heavy metal rock music. Is that M.R. James on the drums? MacCulloch adds: "A novel, needless to add, is being worked on, under the title Dreams of the Dead."

"And that concludes this morning's service." These words, uttered in the Reverend Piper's customarily soft yet somehow vibrant rasp, emerged raw and steaming into the chill air of the little church. To Tim, at seven years old the youngest member of the sparse congregation, they were the most welcome he had heard that morning. It was unlikely that he was alone in this, for the Vicar was not popular among the inhabitants of the village in which he had taken up residence less than a year before. He lived alone, having dispensed with the services of the housekeeper, a fiercely voluble widow by the name of Mrs. Atterby, with quite remarkable ease shortly after his arrival. He took no part in the village's admittedly limited social life; if he was seen at all on weekdays it would be only on a visit to the butcher or greengrocer, where those who served him proved notably unsuccessful in drawing him into conversation. It was hardly surprising that attendance at the church, patchy at the best of times, had dwindled. The combination of the Vicar's aloofness with a predilection in his homilies for esoteric topics, abstruse arguments and dubious conclusions had seriously eroded what little loyalty to the Sabbath tradition had existed among his spiritual charges. By Christmas, it was generally predicted, he would perform his offices alone.

Yet interest in the Reverend Piper himself had increased even as the attraction of his liturgies diminished. Thus it was that, when Tim and his elder brother Robert were released after that Sunday's lunch from the confines of their terraced cottage in the upper part of the village into silvery ineffectual late autumn sunshine, their talk and their footsteps turned simultaneously towards the church again.

"Mum's decided we're not going to church any more," declared Robert.

"Why?"

" 's obvious. She doesn't like the Vicar, and Dad doesn't neither. No one can stand him. He's so boring. Ol' Thomas used to come round visiting all the time. And he had that tea party in the summer. Piper just doesn't do anything. And the way he always stares at you..."

"But what does he do all the time?" prompted Tim.

"Don't know. P'rhaps he just sits and reads books. Must be really boring. I'll bet that's why he goes on so much on Sunday mornings. He just reads all these books all week and gurgitates them."

"Ol' Mrs. Atterby sneaked back into the vicarage, didn't she, with her spare key. And Piper scared her off. She said..."

"That silly ol' baggage is scared of her own shadow. I'll bet ol' Thomas didn't really like her either. I'll bet he was glad to get away from her."

"Why'd he have to go, anyway?"

"Cause the Bishop told him to of course, dummy."

"Why?"

"Stop asking stupid questions."

Tim contented himself with contemplation of the view from the end of a row of cottages at a sharp bend in the lane. From here he could look down over the major part of the village, a small grid of one-and two-storied gray stone terraces that looked as if it had been assembled elsewhere and dropped in one piece on the side of the valley it occupied. He could see the slate-roofed schoolhouse perched halfway up, wearing its weekend aspect of dormant foreboding. Moorland and white sky above made everything seem puny.

Soon the two boys had reached the place where the church, a building remarkable for its lack of interesting architectural features, squatted despondently on the valley floor. The sides of the valley outreached the stub of a tower with indifferent ease, excluding most of the daylight long before evening. But the glass of the windows was stained only with dust, enabling Tim and Robert to peer into the dim interior when they had scrambled up to a flaky stone sill.

They had doubtless expected no more than the fleeting satisfaction that a valedictory survey of a place of former incarceration may yield. It was with surprised delight that they discerned the tall, dark-clad figure of the Reverend Piper before the altar-stone, which was situated on a small platform at the end of the church farthest from their vantage point.

"What's he doing?" asked Tim, whispering although there seemed little likelihood of their being heard from within the church.

"Don't know." Robert's voice was uncomfortably strident in its determination not to whisper. He licked his fingers and began to rub dirt from the window. Tim strained to see through the clear patch with him. The Vicar was addressing the deserted nave as if in continuation of the morning's service, although they could not tell whether or not he was speaking. His form was indistinct in the murk. Tim squinted in an attempt to distinguish the movement of lips. The Vicar's head bent forward as if to look upon an invisible congregation. But Tim saw only featureless black where the staring eyes should have been. The blind head lacked even a mouth with which to pronounce its cryptic discourse.

Tim cried out and tugged at his brother's arm. Robert stared uncomprehendingly at him for a moment, then glanced once more toward the figure in front of the altar. When he turned back to Tim there was a certain familiar glint in his eyes, one, which promised an interlude of prolonged, and merciless teasing.

"He's standing with his back to you, stupid! You stupid idiot. 'Where's his face gone?' " (This last with devastatingly accurate mimicry.) "Can't you see what he's doing? I don't know how someone of your age can be so stupid..." And so forth. When Tim looked at the altar again he saw that, rather than facing the body of the church as he had supposed, the Vicar had his back turned to the dusty pews and was gazing into what appeared to be a full-length mirror, mounted where the lectern was usually placed. It was impossible to see what the mirror was reflecting, but it appeared from the man's stance before it and occasional movement of the hands and arms that he must be practicing the delivery of a sermon. This amusing inference was confirmed for the boys when, presumably as a result of the Vicar's rising enthusiasm for his text, they began to catch brief phrases and, shortly, what sounded like whole sentences, echoing strangely and disjointedly in the emptiness within.

"What language is that he's talking?"

"Must be Latin. They used to talk that all the time in church."

"How can he give his sermon in Latin, stupid," retorted Tim, trying by his scornful tone to regain some lost dignity. "It doesn't sound anything like Latin to me."

"Well, I don't know. Who cares?" Robert's lack of a knowledgeable rejoinder was the signal for the end of the conversation, and of their inconclusive eavesdropping. The pair slipped off their ledge and began to dawdle homeward. Tim wanted to mention that his final glimpse of the Reverend Piper had caught him in the act of kneeling down before his mirror, but as Robert's scathing commentary upon the Man With No Face incident extended itself he began to wish the subject closed, so held his peace.

It must have been about the beginning of Advent that services at the Reverend Piper's church ceased, although no one could be certain about this afterward. The few in whom force of habit had proved equal to the increasingly bitter weather did not protest very strongly when they found the church door locked one Sunday morning, and as far as anyone knew it remained so until the following summer, when the building was reopened and reconsecrated by a new minister. That the vicarage was still inhabited was evident only from the fact that the groceries, which were by then being delivered to its door, continued to be paid for and, presumably, consumed. The local doctor had earlier exerted his strength of personality long enough to confirm that the Vicar was probably not ill, although undoubtedly very rude, and the village settled down thereafter to a seasonal feast of speculation.

If the various hypotheses that were aired in adult circles were improbable, their translation to the realm of juvenile theorization rendered them entirely fantastic. An eyewitness report of the arrival by van at the vicarage during the preceding summer of some unidentifiable item of furniture came to be viewed by Robert and certain of his acquaintances as the most trifling in an endless series of clandestine deliveries, and the incontrovertible evidence of the Vicar's involvement in criminal activities on the grandest scale imaginable. Schemes were devised whereby unlawful entry to the church or the vicarage might be obtained, and the Reverend Piper's booty brought to light by heroically public-spirited investigators. This would all be of little interest, save that one of the proposed methods of secret ingress to the church turned out to be feasible, and Tim felt that his status among his peers had yet to recover from the blow dealt it by his brother's widespread publication of the earlier adventure and Tim's less than impressive contribution to it. Even so, it seems unlikely that matters would have progressed as they did had

not Tim committed another embarrassing indiscretion by letting slip to Robert something of his long-standing ambition to "stay awake and see Santa Claus" on Christmas Eve. Perhaps it was the added humiliation resulting from this that finally propelled Tim in the direction of the church again and, more specifically, toward a broken window in the vestry that the boys had noted on a previous expedition.

It was with a sense of unreality that Tim found himself crouching alone on the stone floor of the deserted vestry to recover his breath, the window having proved unexpectedly amenable to his half-hearted attempt to open it. It was not quite full night outside, and once he could identify the furnishings of the meager antechamber with reasonable confidence, he forced himself to move toward its door to commence the brief circumnavigation of the building that he intended should restore his prestige among his schoolfellows.

The vestry door opened into the chancel behind the altar. The scuff of Tim's shoes was amplified as he stepped out into the larger space. The interior of the church had expanded since he had last been there, its sides visible solely on account of the dead gray oblongs of the windows, its roof a vault of darkness that sucked echoes from the slightest sound. Tim became conscious of his breathing, of the faint rustling of his clothes. It seemed as if even the contact of his eyelashes each time he blinked must be audible in the depthless hush. But the gaunt, cloaked figure that waited by the altar-stone made no sound at all, and Tim was almost upon it before he saw it. Terror held him immobile just long enough to enable him to recognize the oval outline of the Reverend Piper's mirror, now covered with a dustsheet. He turned away from it hastily and began to pace stiffly down the center aisle, determined to go at least as far as the main door at its other end before the inclination to flee from the whispering shadows became irresistible.

He had almost reached his destination when something slithered behind him. He turned. Disturbed, presumably, by a draught from the open window in the vestry, the sheet that had veiled the mirror now lay in a heap at its base. The mirror's frame held only a clot of thick darkness. Tim's nerve had all but gone. He began the walk back to the altar, this being the sole route by which he could regain the vestry door; only his reluctance to pass by the mirror again prevented him from running. The echoes of his footsteps became louder than ever, and the aisle now seemed like a long dim tunnel, with the mirror forming a patch of inky black instead of light at its end. As he drew nearer, the patch took on a dull sheen and he began to make out his dark twin emerging from the oily deep of its own tunnel. He was still trying to recognize his own features on the rapidly distending silhouette when his foot struck the first of the steps leading up to the altar, and he began to topple forward. One knee cracked painfully against the third step up, but then he

had regained his balance and was running for the door, overwhelmed by panic. Half a minute later he was out of the church.

He told no one of the incident. Indeed, he found difficulty in remembering afterward exactly what had happened. His breathless race home proved sufficient to relegate to his subconscious the realization that, as he had raised himself from his involuntary genuflection before the abandoned altar-stone, the echo of his footsteps had continued with purposeful regularity, and the shadow in the mirror had not stopped growing.

The expected snow did not come that year, although the sky looked heavy with it, and perhaps it was this that produced a sense of imminence in the village during the fortnight preceding Christmas. Such an atmosphere was unusual, for the villagers never displayed much fervor in their celebration of the midwinter festival, anticipation of the event usually being confined to the youngest among them, for whom the promise of midnight-delivered bounty still held magic. Otherwise the season was marked by the odd sprig of holly on doors that closed earlier than usual, or a candle faint behind a window's winter grime, and each slow dawn found the streets as uninviting as the frost-bound fields beyond, and as desolate.

The school holiday began a week before Christmas. The light was already poor when Robert made his typically erratic way home on the last day of term, so he had scarcely noticed the hunched shape that waited in a doorway, its face engulfed in a dark shawl, before it stepped forward to block his path. It was Mrs. Atterby, who it seemed had observed Robert in the vicinity of the church (over which she still liked to "keep watch," as she put it) and was intent upon the dispensation of appropriate admonitions. Familiar as he was with the format of such reprimands, Robert could not help noticing as he waited for the old woman to finish that hers contained an element of the uncommon. References to "the book" and "the arched portal" occurred frequently, intermingled with phrases such as "the word made flesh and the flesh made word," "the black despoiler," and "the tenth plague of Egypt." The Biblical overtones were vaguely apparent to Robert; perhaps it was the fog that puffed from Mrs. Atterby's lips that shrouded their sense. Her disapproval of the new Vicar was the most clearly expressed part of her monologue -- "Ought to have defrocked him, but they said they didn't have the evidence. They knew what they were doing, be certain of that!" She ended by exhorting Robert to "flee to the hills lest you be consumed." Her arthritic fingers clawed the air in what might have been meant as a blessing before she retreated, wheezing, to her doorway.

It was not until late in the afternoon of Christmas Eve that Robert saw Mrs. Atterby again. He poised himself to evade her, but her attention was concentrated upon the application to her front door of some late decoration, and his backward glance at the end of the lane found her still groping at her task as the darkness of the valley overflowed its sides and seeped into the sky.

The moon that rose on Christmas night brought stillness to the air. Tim had lain wide-eyed in his bed for hours, awaiting the time when he could be sure that Robert, with whom he shared the room, was asleep, so as to take up his vigil at the window. His brother's derision had not swayed him from his purpose; he was determined that if he did not attain a conclusive sighting of the nocturnal benefactor of infant legend that Christmas it would be through no lack of will on his part. Soon after midnight he crept to the window, which overlooked the lane from the upper floor of the house. Softly he opened the curtains to the deep night. The world was empty, and shadows gaped everywhere like glimpses of the abyss.

After he had watched for half an hour or so, Tim perceived that one of these shadows was moving slowly toward the house and, as it passed through a pool of moonlight, he saw that it was a dark-cloaked figure trudging soundlessly up the lane. With a barely controlled sense of elation Tim noted the heavy sack that it dragged behind it over the cobblestones. At first he thought that the object of his now fervent scrutiny would pass by his home as it had the others in the terrace, but as it drew level with his window, it paused and raised its cowed head. Tim prepared to withdraw from view, for his parents had warned him of the effect that the discovery of spectators was said to have upon the good Saint's seasonal generosity. He delayed for another few seconds when he noticed that this personage had not yet turned its gaze upon the house. Instead, it continued to face straight ahead, the angle of its hood suggesting that it was listening for something, or perhaps sniffing the air. After another moment or so had passed, however, it began to turn around, and Tim retreated hastily to his bed.

There remained but one obstacle to the satisfaction of Tim's curiosity. He had begged his father to leave the front door unbolted that night, but had met with intransigent refusal and an assurance that locks were no hindrance to the visitor he expected. This was proven when, less than a minute later, he felt the rush of frigid air that signaled the opening of the door. Almost simultaneously, his straining ears detected the sound of a heavy tread upon the bottom step of the staircase. The sound ascended slowly but unfalteringly, counter-pointed by the soft bumping of the sack as it was pulled up behind. There was a further accompaniment that Tim's

imagination, which was at that time generating all manner of fascinating images, failed to account for in any way, although a moment's consideration might have suggested that it was the product of the damage which was being done to the wooden banisters by the intruder's progress.

Similar damage was sustained by the paneling of the bedroom door during the brief period of fumbling that preceded the admission into Tim's room of something he could distinguish in outline only; his first irrational impression was not so much that someone had come in as that a part of his bedroom wall by the door had been removed instantaneously, leaving in its place a hole into nowhere. The creaking of floorboards that marked the shadow's advance to a point some three feet inside the room enabled Tim to discard this disconcerting notion quickly and turn to the question of the procedure the visitant would follow in accomplishing his purpose. This even yet remained a matter for conjecture, for he now stood utterly motionless, an indeterminate bulk in the darkness. As Tim stared in an effort to penetrate the seamless black of the figure's robes, so as to obtain some sign of its intent, the first cold drops of fear began to trickle through the warmth of his excitement. The perfect stillness with which the figure held its pose, its bowed head still concealed beneath the hood, seemed unnatural, although Tim could not quite grasp why. He knew only that he could not bear to look upon that disquieting spectacle for long, and was parting his lips to call to his brother, when the dark head lifted at last.

Tim's next conscious memory was of the awakening of Robert and his parents by his screams, by which time the stranger had quit their home. That the boy had suffered a nightmare was a theory swiftly disposed of when the gouged and splintered condition of the woodwork, where inexplicably powerful hands had clutched it exploratively, was noticed. There was also the lingering odor, a fleshy reek that reminded Robert of the butcher's shop on a hot afternoon. But Tim could tell them little of what had transpired, or of the source of the horror that was subsequently to invest his every sight or remembrance of an unlit room, a hooded figure, or a sack that bulged with an anonymous burden. That which had answered his unvoiced invitation had granted him only the briefest communion before passing on to the fulfillment of its mission elsewhere. But in dreams to come, the dark bud of that moment would unfold, and in a world composed of shadow and crooked moon-washed lanes he would alternately run from or kneel before some ancient creature of the void, whose eyes glowed like hot cinders in the smoky pit where its face should have been, lit by the furnace of its eternal hunger.

The Reverend Piper's corpse was found in his church on Boxing Day. Of the myriad rumors that swarmed about this discovery, one of the more fanciful suggested that the intricate patterns that he had carved into his own flesh with a paper-knife were characters in an unknown language. What was eventually established was that he had bled to death from these wounds shortly before sunset on Christmas Eve. It was probably only this fact that caused the villagers to hesitate in attributing to the insane Vicar the kidnap of six children, all under the age of two, from their homes in the village between nightfall on the 24th of December and daybreak on the 25th. The largest police operation that the district had ever seen failed to trace the babies' bodies, much less any clue as to the whereabouts or motive of the perpetrator, the signs of whose passage through his victims' homes were as baffling as they were abundant.

The case was still "under investigation" on the first anniversary of the tragedy, but by then the villagers had given up hope of its being solved by the authorities. Perhaps the red painted crosses that began to appear that next December on the doors of the village, doubtless following the example of Mrs. Atterby, were a commemorative gesture. The new Vicar, at least, was happy to regard them as such, and to tolerate what he sometimes described to himself as an undercurrent of superstition, which happily did not seem to impede the rebirth of orthodox religious observance following his arrival in the parish. An upsurge of faith was, he knew, to be expected after a calamity of the type that had stricken these simple people, and he regarded himself as rather privileged to be in many ways the focus of their reawakened piety. Of course, there was the decidedly unpleasant business of his predecessor's history to be lived with; fortunately, the Church authorities had been most thorough in their removal of the deceased's effects, including the antique mirror in which it was said the madman had contrived to view his bizarre self-immolation. Even the vicarage's stock of books -- "library" would be far too generous a term -- had been rigorously weeded of any suspected to have been added during the previous eighteen months. The newly reappointed housekeeper, an efficient if overly talkative soul, was of the opinion that these items "ought to have been buried with him," and for all that his successor cared they could have been; but the old woman had concluded with a sigh that "they won't want to get rid of them, though; mayhap they'll find further use for them yet," and he supposed that this was fair enough also.

Reflections

by Jeffrey Goddin

Jeffrey Goddin returns to The Year's Best Horror Stories after a long absence ("The Smell of Cherries" in Series XI). Since then Goddin has had two horror novels published by Leisure Books: The Living Dead and Blood of the Wolf. His short fiction has appeared in such magazines as Deathrealm, Eldritch Tales, Space and Time, and Twilight Zone Magazine. He has many novels in progress.

Born in a small town in Indiana on July 7, 1950, Goddin now lives in Bloomington, Indiana. Goddin describes himself as a "Redneck with an education," and says: "In general, as a country person I find large cities the most horrific phenomena of existence. They are completely entropic. Their possibilities for human -- and supernatural -- horrors are endless. Witness the following example..."

Jennifer stood against the pale rectangle of the window, holding the long curtains to one side, peering out into the rainy night. Her shoulder, the side of one small breast, her hips, were in silhouette, and were in turn reflected in the glass.

"Did you ever think about what a different sort of world it is when it rains?" she asked.

David lay on the bed, enjoying the feel of the cool sheets, watching her watch the night.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, it's as if the rain both joins things, somehow, and separates them. It joins them in itself. It covers things. But it separates people -- it pushes us apart, into our own little buildings, our own little dry spaces."

He rolled off the bed and walked up behind her, putting his arms around her, under her breasts. Her skin was very soft. She leaned back against his chest.

"You should have been a poet, rather than a painter," he said.

"You don't like my paintings?" She made a face, her wide mouth pouting.

He laughed.

"You know better than that. I think you're great."

They stood like that, she leaning against him, for a long time, watching what they could see of the night through the window -- the old stores on the street below, the tops of the lower houses, the distant lights of another section of the city, all softened, haloed by the moisture in the air.

"Well, time to go now," she said, turning and standing on her toes to give him a kiss. He pulled her to him to feel her breasts against his chest.

"Why, there's plenty of night left...."

"Lustful boy." She bit his neck. "I've got work to do. A whole book to read for Art History."

"Art History? I thought you studio people didn't have to take classes like that."

She shook her head.

"A well rounded mind in a body streaked with oils and acrylic."

"I don't recall finding much acrylic this evening."

She gave him a light slap and danced away.

"I washed." She walked across the little living room retrieving bits of her clothing.

He enjoyed watching her, the girlish way in which she made a dance out of retrieving her clothes.

"Anything I can get you? Coffee? Brandy? Candy?"

"A shot of brandy would be nice," she said, leaning back on the bed to tug on her tight jeans. He went into the kitchen and poured two glasses of Martell, brought them back. She was making up the bed.

"You don't need to do that."

"Oh yes, oh yes!" She shook her head and her dark curls flew. "The memory of making your bed will help me think of you when I'm all alone tonight, with Picasso, Modigliana, Marc and the others."

She tossed back the brandy, looking up at him. Her slightly-too-wide mouth held a broad smile.

"I like seeing you walk around naked like that." She abruptly knelt in front of him and gave him a few particular kisses. He closed his eyes and put his hands in back of her head, but she pulled gently away.

"Something to remember me by," she laughed, "and to look forward to for next time."

"When's that?"

"Come see you tomorrow?"

"Please!"

She gave him a quick kiss and headed for the door.

"Until then, and then...."

And she was gone.

It felt strange to be dressing alone. He wished she had spent the night, but then, Jennifer was like that. There and gone. Still, he considered himself very lucky. After all, he had found her -- a woman who really enjoyed loving -- in an era when more and more women seemed reluctant to make the time.

He turned on the lights; the recessed ceiling fluorescent he'd installed himself, and the drawing room light over his drafting table. Perhaps, he thought, he was lucky in more than Jennifer. He had a fairly clean, safe city in which to live, he was healthy, and had a good job.

But the place still seemed very empty without her. He felt an edge of loneliness creeping up on him. An only child, he had been very much aware of aloneness all his life. He was even more aware of it since he'd been living in the city. Something about the sheer masses of people around you, all going their separate ways. And here you were, looking forward to another evening by yourself.

He tried to play it lightly with Jennifer, because she seemed to like that. But he wondered what she would say if he mentioned marriage, that weird old-fashioned business where you saw the same person's face every night and every morning. He thought he would really like that a lot.

What would she say? Too soon, said the reasoning part of his mind. Don't push her. And tonight, you have work to do.

He spread out the commercial accounts he'd brought home to mock up. Most of them were pretty simple designs: newspaper and magazine layout for retail stuff. The Yuppies were enamored with British names, and he'd gotten a few accounts by suggesting the addition of a "Westminster" or a "Northumberland" to the copy, and by adding a few British style visuals: the rolled broly in the corner, a smoking jacket on a hall tree, a bric-a-brac mantelpiece, a hunting horn on the wall. It was a little heavy, but his clients had loved it. And they were paying for it.

I, who once wanted to be the new Matta of oils, am giving form to the yuppie dream. It would be nice to have some of his own dreams again.

He sat down at the table and began to rough out some frames. He was drawing a storefront, and doing a little variation with light and shadow on the window. He suddenly had the odd desire to draw a face in the window -- not behind it, as a person looking out, but in it, an effect he might have used back in his oil painting days.

Funny thought. He could visualize the face clearly, that of a man in middle age, with a look of utter terror on his features. David stared at the black rectangle on the page and shivered. Weird.

He sketched several of the accounts to the point where he could finish them at work the next day. It didn't take long. He found himself sitting, daydreaming, and feeling a little spacy.

Maybe it was Jennifer. It was so new, what they had together. And this business of just coming over, hopping into bed, then off again, this was new to him too. She had only spent the night once, but he thought she would probably stay over the weekend. He was looking forward to it very, very much.

He stood and began to pace. He was restless, still had some nervous energy to use up. He thought about jogging, but he wasn't really in the mood.

For some reason he thought of the neighbor he hadn't met, a retired fellow, or so said his landlord, living in the twin apartment to David's on the other side of the building. From time to time as he worked, David had heard his neighbor moving around, and the tinny sound of a radio.

He looked at the clock. It was only 9:00. On impulse, David decided to visit his neighbor.

The building was a bit odd. His apartment was the only one that had been restored so far. To reach the other apartment, he had to go down the stairs to the first floor. The place was stripped, the walls patched for painting, the only light a dim yellow bulb by the exterior door. Across the room a second flight of stairs led directly up to the other apartment. He found a switch beside the stairs, and a dim light came on above him. He began cautiously to climb.

The stairs hadn't been fixed yet, and they gave off odd squeaks and moans as he climbed, holding tightly to the makeshift banister that was partly wooden, partly a piece of metal pipe stuck in to cover a break in the railing.

It was very quiet, there at the end of the stairs, and almost dark, because the bulb in an open socket by the door couldn't have been above a forty watt.

He knocked softly on the door, and the sound echoed in the stairwell.

"Hello? Mr. Arnold?"

He could hear the shuffling of feet in the room beyond. The door opened a crack. He noticed that there were two chains on the door, on the inside. He saw one faded brown eye, a bit of stubbly jaw.

"Yes?"

"Hi, I'm David Streiber, your new neighbor downstairs. Just thought I'd come up and say 'hi.' "

"You did, did you?"

The eye examined him. The man moved back. Now two dark eyes appeared, above a thickly veined, arched nose, a firm jaw. Arnold's little mustache was dwarfed by the drama of his features.

"You look to be what you say."

"I beg your pardon?"

The door closed, and David heard the chains being withdrawn. The door opened again.

"Come in."

He walked into what must have been the living room. The place was neat, if

not terribly affluent. A few overstuffed chairs, an old Magnavox television on a low stand, a lumpy brown sofa. The colors were all dark, with an air of mild age, reinforced by bits of green-brown carpet. He noticed that sheets of dark plastic were taped over the windows, which looked north and west. Probably to keep the heating bills down.

"Sit down," said Mr. Arnold, pointing at the couch. He went into the kitchen as David cautiously eased down onto the broken springs. In a few minutes, Arnold returned with a bottle of bourbon and ice-filled glasses. He mixed two drinks without asking David if he wanted one. David took the drink, still looking around the place. He noted a decent cupboard in the corner, with some pale bits and pieces of china showing through the dusty glass.

He sipped the bourbon. It was good old Kentucky whiskey.

Arnold had taken a padded dark green chair opposite the couch. He was watching David with an air of caution. The man was of medium height, but slightly stooped, an effect lessened as he sat. He wore heavy cotton work-clothes, green pants and shirt, with an old double-button sweater over it. His face, David realized, with surprise, was somewhat like his own basic features; wide bushy eyebrows, slightly long, thick nose, prominent, firm chin. He was also balding, his forehead broad and smooth. If their ages had been closer, they might have genuinely resembled one another.

"Well," said David, as Arnold remained silent. "I just thought I'd come and make contact, let you know who you had for a neighbor."

The older man seemed to relax slightly. He nodded.

"Good of you. I keep to myself a lot. But it's good to know that... you're my neighbor. What do you do?"

"I'm an artist, er, a commercial artist at the moment."

Arnold nodded.

"Happens to the best of us. I was a poet when I was young. Had some published, too." He pointed to a low set of bookshelves under the television, which seemed to contain some old journals under a layer of dust. "But I had to make a living. Was a proofreader for the Star until my eyes went. Retired out."

"But maybe you still write a little?"

Arnold shrugged.

"Maybe...."

David was drinking the bourbon too quickly, but it felt good. He looked around at the room again.

"Do you keep the windows covered for the heat?" he asked, then wondered if it might not be a tactful question.

"Nope, landlord pays the heat here."

Of course, just like in David's own apartment. But the Imp of the Perverse was in him. He couldn't help asking:

"So why keep them covered?"

"Reflections. I don't like to look at them. And I have very keen peripheral vision, though my direct vision's faded. Seeing the reflections out of the corner of my eyes distracts me from my book.

"Oh, so you are writing a book!" said David. "I've always wanted to write. Maybe you'll tell me a little about it?"

Arnold had finished his bourbon. He took David's glass, went to the kitchen for more ice, and returned with the drinks.

"Your book?" David prompted.

"It's about...." Arnold hesitated. "I really shouldn't tell you about it at all, but... it's on my mind so much...."

Arnold seemed to make up his mind. He'd already drunk half his bourbon.

"It's about reflections. God! Have you ever noticed how many reflections there are all around us in the city? They're everywhere -- reflections from cars, and people's glasses, and pools of water, and windows -- especially the windows.

"The thing about reflections is, they're not empty."

"Huh?"

"Did you ever look into a reflection, and see a face -- only the face wasn't yours?"

David nodded. "Sure. Only the face was mine, just distorted. Or maybe the face of somebody just passing by."

Arnold shook his head. "That's what they'd like us to think. But there is something else there. Something that doesn't like us."

"How do you know?"

Arnold shook his head. His slightly loose gesture told David that the man was getting intoxicated.

"I don't, unless... It's like the windows. Windows are made of glass, and glass is made of silica. We melt sand -- quartz -- to get pure silica. And we use quartz crystals to send messages, and to store information in computers.

"Think of all the silica in a window. And of all the windows in a city. Frequencies can go from a crystal to a crystal -- why not from a window to a window? What if all that silica has a kind of mind of its own -- or suppose it can trap spirits, the spirits of those who've died, and never quite made it away from the earth, like we trap a bit of information in a silica chip? And suppose that this "trapping" effect allows them to build up a kind of awareness from the spirits that are trapped -- a kind of artificial intelligence? And suppose they're hostile to living humanity, because we're still alive, and we have a chance to go -- wherever we go when we die. But they're trapped here in a kind of conscious prison.

"And just suppose, that the weird qualities of reflected light sometimes let us see into their prison, and see their faces... And suppose that they're dangerous."

"Dangerous? How?"

"They take people who know about them."

"How?"

Arnold leaned back and scratched his balding head. He splashed a little whiskey into his empty glass before answering.

"I don't know. But I knew a man. He drank a lot. He was on the streets a lot. He used to be a bookmaker until he got to drinking too much to handle the figures. It was he told me about them. And then, they got him."

David felt himself both intrigued and a little nervous. This talk was weird, but it was interesting.

"Just how could they get him?"

"I don't know. He had a little place, over west of the Circle. But most of the time he just walked around the streets. And one day I met him and we split a bottle,

and he told me about them. The next day, he was gone."

"Gone?"

"Gone. Just disappeared. But... I saw him one day. I saw him, in the glass of a window, as it reflected a streetlight on around midnight. And he was screaming, trying to get out."

David shivered. This was pushing it a bit.

"So what did you do then?"

"Do? What could I do? I hid, that's what. 'Cause they knew about me. I just hid in my house and ate the food I had, and stayed hid, until they forgot about me. And then, when I went out again, I just didn't look at 'em."

"I shouldn't be telling you this," he went on. "They might be after me now. There might be some way they could listen."

Arnold's voice was getting foggy. The rapid drinking had gone to David's head as well.

"Can I get a drink of water?" he asked.

"Sure."

He took his glass into the kitchen, rinsed it and got a drink of the rusty tap water. It seemed like the pipes weren't used much. The one window to the kitchen had been covered with the same black plastic as was used in the living room, and as he passed the little bathroom; he saw the paler spot on the wall where the mirror had been taken down.

He walked back into the living room. Arnold seemed to be dozing. Rather than disturb him, David let himself out, softly closing the door behind him.

Most of the next day at work had been typically boring -- up until the windstorm. As he sketched in the narrow white office, David's sinuses had told him that some kind of storm was near -- that, and the hollowness of the sounds through his half-opened window.

Then, about an hour before quitting time, the wind came up suddenly, a quick, fierce storm filled with hail that threatened to crash through the window.

He slammed the window shut, blotted the water from his drawing table, and tried to see into the blue-green fury outside. The rain was intense, blurring visibility. He saw cars slowed to a crawl in the street below, heard occasional crashes, as of something blown down by the wind.

Then, almost as quickly as it had come, the storm faded to a light drizzle, which quickly ended.

He opened the window, breathed the storm-cleansed air.

By then, it was time to go home.

David liked to walk into work when the weather was clear. He'd walked that morning, and now was enjoying the eight-block trek back to his apartment.

The city had a pleasant, scrubbed look to it, though here and there a sign had been blown down, a garbage can overturned, a window broken out by the storm.

The trees had a green-gold furring of new leaves against their glistening dark trunks. The metallic and glass surfaces of the buildings were bright and reflective.

As he walked, he found himself noticing just how many reflections there are in a city, from the windows of the buildings, the windows of passing cars, the pools in the streets from the afternoon shower -- even people's glasses, bits of metal on cars and building dressing, have some kind of reflection. Of course, if poor old Arnold's theory were correct, it was only the glass you had to worry about...

And just what did you see when you looked into a reflection? He and Jennifer had once discussed the matter in detail. You saw an image of something that was real -- the sky, a face, a building, a tree -- distorted by a combination of your personal angle of inspection, the reflective qualities of the surface, and whatever distortion was due to the particular type of medium and the angle of the opaque surface behind it.

Jennifer found reflections a kind of artistic challenge, with a touch of science thrown in. It was certainly a healthier attitude than Arnold's.

David was in for a surprise when he opened the door to his apartment. Jennifer had used the key he'd given her. In front of the long window was an easel,

and on it, a painting. The oil was still wet. The scene appeared to be a "student ghetto" kind of neighborhood a few blocks to the northeast. He thought that he recognized the type of red-brick facings, if not the actual location. By the light in the painting, it was just after dark -- or very early dawn, still a thin line of paleness in the sky.

The scene was wonderful, a clear sense of identity shrouding the old houses, the small store on the corner of the block. Could she have painted it so fast? No, she must have been working on it before, and had brought it over to complete at his apartment.

He sat down and looked at the painting for a moment. There was a sharply angled window of the little store at the left foreground that had been left blank, but for a vaguely sketched-in face. It puzzled him a little.

Then the feeling came back, the feeling of happiness. The easel with the painting was a very good sign. It seemed to indicate that she might be building a presence here. He certainly wouldn't object.

He had made a ham, tomato and lettuce sandwich, and was halfway through it and a beer, when he realized that he'd been hearing heavy footfalls on the stairs on the other side of the house for several minutes.

It seemed odd, that people would be going up and down his elderly neighbor's stairs like that.

Then he heard a set of heavy footsteps ascending his stairs.

The sound gave him a weird feeling, like the knocking on the door in... what play was that?

A heavy fist crashed into his door.

He put down his half-eaten sandwich and walked to the door, his heart pounding. Why was he so nervous? He wished suddenly that he had a heavy stick behind the door, or a chain on it...

He forced himself to open the door a crack.

The man at the door was tall, beefy, in blue police uniform. He had a friendly smile.

"Hi," he said. "I'm Sergeant Donnelly, Indianapolis Police Department. Just

want to see if you could tell me something about your neighbor."

"Mr. Arnold?"

"Yeah. Mind if I come in?"

"No, sure." David backed into the room. Donnelly seemed not to look around, in that way a good policeman has of taking in everything.

"I was wondering if you could give us a lead on Mr. Arnold's next-of-kin?"

"Next-of-kin? I don't know. Did something happen to him?"

"Yeah," said Donnelly, taking out a notebook. "He died this afternoon. You know that windstorm we had?"

"Yes."

"Well, he must have been in the wrong place at the wrong time. One of the big windows at the Federal Building shattered. Piece of glass nearly cut his head off."

"Jesus!"

"Yeah. Know any of his relations?"

"No, but the landlord might." David gave Donnelly his landlord's name and phone number. "Sorry, I really didn't know him all that well. He seemed nice enough."

Donnelly shrugged. "Yeah, it's too bad. Wrong place at the wrong time."

He nodded and left the room.

A little stunned, David walked back and sat down in the chair by the window. The purplish light of early Spring dusk was coloring the pane of glass. He could just see the distorted edge of his reflection.

He idly reached down by the chair and picked up the sketchpad that Jennifer must have left behind. He riffled through it. It mostly contained studies of buildings. And the windows... In several of them she'd roughed in reflections, sometimes with what seemed to be a dimly perceived, grotesque face. The sketches had a neat kind of off-center mood to them. They were almost a parody of his own commercial sketches, and he wondered if she'd left them there deliberately for him to find.

He suddenly wanted to hear her voice very badly. He went to the low walnut table where the phone rested, brought it back to the chair, dialed her number. She answered on the first ring.

"Jennifer?"

"Yes! David! Terrific! Boy, it's been a weird day. How did you like that storm?"

"I like it," he said, visualizing the broad window shattering, the piece of glass slicing into Arnold's neck. Should he tell her about it? No. "I had a great view from my office."

"I bet. And the sheer power of the thing! And something strange happened to me coming home. I was walking by the Federal Building. They'd just put in a new pane of glass, like maybe the storm busted one out. But in the window beside it, there was this neat man's face in a reflection. He was balding, with pale bushy eyebrows, and a little mustache. And this great big arched nose."

"No!" He couldn't help blurting it out. She'd described Arnold perfectly.

"Yes! I stopped and made some sketches. I think I'll use the face in a painting."

"No, I mean... Jennifer, things have gotten a little strange...." He couldn't go on. He didn't know how to explain the sudden rush of fear -- fear for her -- that gripped him.

"What? How strange?"

"Nothing. I'm just a little burnt out. Coming over tonight?"

"For sure. But first I'm going to walk around a little, see what kind of reflections the windows might have. Maybe I'll see that man's face again."

"Like, I'm sure," said David in his best California accent. "Like really."

Jennifer laughed.

"I'm bound to get some good angles, anyway. It's humid out, and that might change the shapes a little."

"Sounds neat. Look forward to seeing you, as in, intensely."

"Me too. Gotta go! See you later. Bye."

And she hung up.

He slowly put down the phone. Jennifer was coming back tonight. It almost made him relax.

He tried to work, but it was hard to concentrate. He had a beer, made a sandwich. His eyes kept returning to Jennifer's sketchpad. Windows and reflections. He looked at the painting on the easel, the Sine of red brick buildings. He had an idea.

He knew the part of town she was sketching in. He'd go walking there and surprise her. And if he missed her, she could just let herself in.

He quickly wrote her a note, grabbed a jacket, and slipped down the stairs, out into the night.

* * *

The evening air felt cool and clean. He thrust his hands in the pockets of his old field jacket and began to walk quickly through the hybrid neighborhood, heading roughly northeast.

As he walked, he noticed by subtle changes whether or not the mixture of old manufacturing buildings in a certain block had been chosen by the developers. Here and there a limestone facing showed up paler in the golden-pink sodium vapor light -- a sign of sandblasting. Some of the buildings had new railings at the front. In one mixed block he noticed a tall old house, the door, windows, fanlight obviously restored. He hurried on.

He was entering the neighborhood where he thought Jennifer had set her painting. Houses of red brick, two and three stories, began to line the street, now under an occasional pale streetlight of the old white electric globe variety. A few people of mixed races sat on the steps, chatting in the cool evening. From one open doorway came the sound of restored rock: "Got a bad case of lovin' you!"

Fewer people were on the street now. He was entering the eastern edge of the district, near where the city had torn out a swath of older houses to extend one of the interstates across town. Now many of the places he passed were vacant, some with windows boarded up. Someone with the look of a wino beckoned him from a shadowy doorway, but it was too dark to see the man clearly.

And he found himself getting nervous, more nervous than just being in this section of town would account for. Nobody bothered him when he was wearing his field jacket -- it was a very non-affluent look. No, it wasn't himself he was worried

about.

Then, just ahead, he saw Jennifer.

She was sitting cross-legged under a streetlight on a corner, sketchpad on her knees, drawing the old store building in front of her. A broad angled window faced the corner. It would probably have a good reflection.

He almost yelled as soon as he saw her. But no, no need. Barely half a block separated them now. He'd just slip up on her.

As he walked slowly forward, watching her, she stood suddenly, the sketchpad falling awkwardly to the sidewalk. As if in some weird, slow motion dance she took one step toward the window, two, her arms spread wide as if to embrace the cool glass surface.

"Jennifer!" he called, beginning to run. "Jennifer!" She didn't seem to hear him. She glided toward the window.

"Jennifer!"

He was very close to her now. She half turned her head, as if with painful effort. He thought he saw her lips form his name.

Then she stepped into the window.

He skidded to a halt. The window was intact, but she was gone. He couldn't believe it. He stood back from the window, and the angle of the streetlight caught a reflection.

And in the reflection, he saw her face, her eyes wide and sightless, her mouth jerked open in a scream of utter terror.

He had to do something. She was in the window. She had to be alive, somehow, somewhere. Got to do something, anything! Got to help her!

He saw a piece of steel pipe laying in the doorway of the old store. He picked it up. It was about two feet long, heavy. He turned back to face the window at the angle of the reflection.

And he saw her face, grotesquely distorted, mouth the words: "Help me! Heelp mee!"

Only one thing he could think of to do.

He smashed the pipe into the side of the window, near the frame.

A crack appeared. And in the instant that steel met glass, it was as if a horde of small, soft creatures like moths swarmed over his face, and he seemed to hear tiny voices, repeating, echoing:

"Help me help me help me help me!"

He smashed the bar into the glass again, and again, and again....

The police, summoned by a terrified neighbor, found two situations in one block: a man, running down the street, frantically smashing in every window he came to with a steel pipe, and a lovely young woman, who'd apparently had her throat cut, lying in the ruins of the shattered storefront window.

The first two officers on the scene were unsure if the two situations were related, but they called for backup anyway.

The street was soon filled with the blood-red reflections of the police cars' revolving lights. Armed officers cautiously approached the wild-eyed man. But he was already wearing down.

There were simply too many windows.

Zombies For Jesus

by Nina Kiriki Hoffman

Nina Kiriki Hoffman is another of the fast-rising new stars who have suddenly and prolifically burst onto the scene. Some new writers sneak up on you: been around for quite a few years, writing quietly, publishing something memorable every other year or so, until suddenly you know they're out there. They're snipers. Other new writers just kick in the door and open up with a pump shotgun. Hoffman is one of those. Horror, fantasy, and science fiction -- she seems content with blowing them all away.

Born in Los Angeles on March 20, 1955, Hoffman grew up in southern California, lived in Idaho seven years, and has made Oregon her home these past half dozen years. Her most recent sales include stories picked up by Borderlands, Obsessions, Weird Tales, Pulphouse, Women of Darkness II, Amazing Stories, and Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine. Oh, also Grue and 2AM. Her stories are unpredictable and sometimes off-the-wall. Witness "Zombies for Jesus" -- wherein Hoffman gives us angst and zombies stirred together in one strange brew.

I was thinking about women, live ones, dead ones, and in between.

"Ante is one finger joint," said Slim. "Any finger joint."

I put my hands in my lap, ready to sit this one out. I'd already lost a finger this game and didn't feel like playing anymore. There were a few clicks and some mushy thuds as the others anted up.

The flies was loud in the afternoon stillness, drifting here and there, feasting, lazy in the hot amber light coming through the canvas tent. I brushed one off my nose. Most of the boys didn't bother, as their nerves was mostly dead and they had no interest in personal hygiene any longer.

Prettyboy Pritchard stood looking out the tent flap. He was the newest revival, the most whole-looking besides me, and he refused to join us at the poker table; didn't want to lose anything and spoil his pretty wholeness; hadn't settled into the bit-part business of the afterlife yet.

Brownie, down to one finger and one thumb, both of which he needed to hold his cards, said, "Can I use a toe? I got extras. I gotta stay in, Slim. I gotta win some parts back, I really gotta."

"Aw, nobody wants toes," Slim said. "I got thirteen already. You got anything else?"

"Zeke," Brownie said to me, "can you loan me a finger or two?"

"Nope," I said. Last time I loaned him something he lost three of my toes, and it took me six games to get them back, and some pinching in the night, because one of the other guys didn't want to give his up. My body parts were different from most of the others'. I was one of the Reverend Thomas's first Born Agains, before he got the Elixir of Rebirth refined. I figured I got some secret ingredients none of the other zombies had, because most of my body parts had a life of their own, and when the Rev punished us by withholding our zombie pickles, I never got so weak and wobbly as the others did.

I went over to join Prettyboy at the tent flap. Only one thing about him interested me, his still-alive wife. Prettyboy was staring toward the main tent. Faint on the heavy afternoon air, the "Amens!" and "Praise Jesus!" of the meeting sounded like a distant game show.

"It's almost time, isn't it, Zeke?" Prettyboy asked.

"You know one of the angels will be over to fetch you when it's time, Prettyboy."

"But it's almost time, isn't it?"

"Settle down and play some poker, will you?" Slim yelled from over to the table. "We're sick and tired of your whining. All of us what has ears, anyway."

Except me, maybe. Prettyboy's noise didn't bother me. He was the fifth or sixth whiner I'd seen since achieving the Hereafter. Like a constant drip in a sink, he'd drive you nuts if you paid attention to him, didn't bother you none if you just ignored him.

"Will Caroline be there?" Prettyboy asked, pulling on my shirttail. "Will she be there, Zeke?"

I was hoping she would be. She was the most devoted wife I'd ever seen, hung on far longer than most. Most spouses stopped coming to meeting when things went to pieces, figuring death had them parted and they wasn't required to stay by and watch the aftermath.

"She'll be happy to see me, won't she?"

I glanced at him and doubted it. Any live woman with the sense God gave her would run the other direction, with how Prettyboy looked and smelled now -- not that I could smell him; my senses had changed after death -- but so many flies couldn't be wrong. If the Rev didn't hold a revival meeting right soon and find himself a new Prettyboy, business was going to fall off something wicked.

Edging away from Prettyboy, I settled on the ground and made my silent whistle. The finger I had lost to Artie crept off the table and wriggled back to me. I held out my hand and it hooked right up with its own stump, not needing glue at all. I hauled my way up to my feet again by gripping the canvas, and thought about Final Death. The Rev had threatened to chop me up and burn me a couple times, but I threatened right back -- said I'd left some facts about his activities with somebody living and if I died again somebody would see the news got to a reporter. I knew the Rev when he was still a prison doctor doing secret research on his own, and if his Reverend-ness came from God, then I had never been on Death Row for murder.

Lately, though, I'd been brooding more and more about Finals. What good was life, or even half-life, anyway, if you couldn't get near a woman? Might as well see if the Big Nothing was better than what I had now.

The Rev had some Born Again women, but he kept them locked up except for services, when they acted as angels or sang in the choir so long as they weren't too obviously fallen-apart women. The Rev didn't rightly know how the Elixir of Rebirth worked, and he didn't want to find out if those of us who still had the equipment could breed. He tried to keep us quiet by telling us there was no sex in Heaven.

One of the angels, all blonde hair and white robe, came over from the meeting tent. She was pretty recent, looked pale but not too unhealthy except for the big dark circles under her eyes. Just as I was wondering what she died of, she held out a hand to Prettyboy and I saw the slash across her wrist. It was puckered and ugly. Somebody must've loved her, though, to bring her to one of the Rev's revival meetings.

"It's time, brother," she said to Prettyboy. Her voice was nice and gentle. I wondered if they played knuckle poker over to the women's tent, and doubted it, somehow.

"I'm ready," said Prettyboy. He glanced at me. One of his eyes was ready to ooze. I thought, Prettyboy, you should of joined the poker game before this. Show a good enough spirit, and you could be a tent zombie till you fell to pieces or got

too weak to cart furniture around; tent zombies got to travel, and see places, even if it was only at night. In the tents, we all knew what to expect of each other; we'd seen it before. Not like the relatives of the Born Agains. Sometimes, if the relations wailed and hallelujah'ed enough, and the Born Agains agitated for it, the Rev left the Born Agains with their folks, and got out of town before corruption set in. Sometimes I speculated on what happened to them all, wondering who screamed first when something dropped off.

The only other thing Prettyboy had to look forward to if he didn't straighten up and join the tenters was Finals, which looked like the road he was traveling. No sense in him, no fellowship, and too much whine, when he wasn't spouting praise about the life Hereafter, as if he couldn't look at us and see what had happened. How'd he ever get a wife like Caroline?

"Are you Zeke?" the angel said to me. She stood there holding Prettyboy's hand. I wished it were mine. My nerves were pretty iffy, but my vision still worked fine, and just knowing she was touching me would have meant a lot.

"Yes ma'am."

"The Reverend told me to tell you there's going to be a revival meeting tonight."

Good-bye Prettyboy. "Yes, ma'am," I said. The Rev would need me to make the beginning preparations with the Elixir none of the other zombies knew about.

The angel nodded to me, her eyes bright blue in their nests of bruises. She led Prettyboy off across the browning grass, under the blanket of sun. In all that light, Prettyboy looked terrible even from behind. The skin on his arms was yellow and patchy, and clumps of his hair were coming out. I ambled after them, figuring to go to the supply tent beyond the meeting tent and get the Elixir mixing.

Caroline waited by the back flap of the meeting tent. Every time I had seen her she was wearing skirts and blouses that covered all of her except hands, face, and feet, no matter how hot it was. This time the blouse was white and the skirt gray, and inside them she was shaped like a woman in a girlie magazine. She wore her red hair twisted in a knot at the back of her neck. Sweat made her forehead shine.

She smiled at Prettyboy. "Walter," she said, holding out a hand.

I looked down at my hands. Right now I had all my ringers and thumbs and most everything else. My skin was yellowish, but it looked all of a piece, and had

some vitality to it.

Just before the angel lifted the meeting tent's back flap to usher Prettyboy and Caroline inside, I veered over to them. "Walter," I said to Prettyboy, "you look sickly."

Caroline stared at me. "Are you dead?" she asked.

"Born Again, ma'am," I said. I had watched her before. She clung to her Prettyboy like she really loved him, even when some of him came off in her hand. I thought about my wife. Of course, she died a while before I did, but even when we was alive together, she never liked to touch me unless we was in bed.

Caroline put out her hand to me. I stood still, and thought, there's something wrong with this one. Maybe the right kind of wrong. She touched my arm. I felt my skin twitch. It had been a long time. I gave her my best smile. I still had most of my teeth.

"Zeke, I want to go in. I want to tell them about the glories of being Born Again," said Prettyboy.

"Fret -- Walter, you don't look so hot. I think you better go lie down." I buttoned up my shirt, rolled down the sleeves, and tucked in the tails. I hadn't been a Prettyboy since the Rev's early tenting days, though I could have kept the job forever if I had been more worked up about it. Right now I wanted it more than anything I had wanted since I woke to the afterlife.

The angel looked from Prettyboy to me, her eyes troubled. She patted Prettyboy's hand. "Brother, you do look weary," she said.

"But -- but -- " His shoulders sagged.

"Go back to the tent and lie down, Walter," I said, as if rest would do him any good.

He turned and shuffled away.

I looked at Caroline. She slid her arm through the crook in mine. It was like the first jolt in the chair. I knew I liked it, and wanted more; didn't mind dying to get it. "You're really dead?" she asked.

"Ma'am."

We went through the tent flap together, walking up the back of the dais between two wings of the choir, which, decked out in white and blue satin, looked

like a low cloud. They was mostly alive, and not allowed to talk to us. Caroline and I came up beside the pulpit. "Praise the Lord," cried the Rev, not missing a beat, "see what the power of the Lord Jesus can do, and not just in Heaven, but right here on earth. He who raised Lazarus, He who raised Jairus's daughter, He can raise your dead too. Praise the Lord!" He gripped my shoulder as Amens swept the tent. "Look on a wonder! This man stands before you, a testimony to God's greatness, born again into eternal Life, reunited with his beloved. Praise the Lord!"

"Praise the Lord!" The noise was like a wind against us.

"I was lost, but now am found," I yelled. "I was blind but now I see. I was dead to life, a sinner in Satan, but now I am alive again through the power of Jesus." The words came back easy. Caroline's hand stroked my side as I spoke, and I felt her touch through my shirt. I felt it. Her fingernails slid along my ribs. "Born again to be with my beloved, Praise God!" Rib of my rib. Dust of my dust.

When all the singing and sobbing and carrying on was over for the afternoon, and Caroline had gone out to talk to some of the women and tell them about the miracle rebirth of me or Prettyboy, the Rev sidled up to me. "Zeke?" he said.

"What?"

"That was the best performance you ever gave. How come you came back into the fold, boy?"

"I want that woman, Rev. She wants me. Give me the night off and I'll Prettyboy for you again tomorrow."

He tapped his fingers on his white vest and stared off, considering. "You wouldn't run out on me, now would you?"

"You're the man with the special pickles," I said. Most food wouldn't stay down, and without food, we weakened and fell apart even faster. At least, most of us did. The Rev. thought those pickles were the only thing that satisfied our appetites, and he kept them locked up.

"Have a nice night," he said.

She had a car, a beat-up blue Chevette. It felt strange sitting in a passenger seat watching a woman drive only a foot away. Oncoming headlights flickered across her face. Who was she, and why did she cling to her husband so long? If she

was a true believer in Jesus, how come she was taking a stranger home with her?

She parked the car at a cheap motel on the fringe of town. She led me inside, flicking on the light.

The door had hardly closed behind me when she reached for the buttons at the throat of her blouse, staring at me. After opening a couple buttons, she pulled the pins out of her hair and shook it out. It was long and heavy. Her eyes watched me as all her clothes and things came off. I felt the life rising in me then. Whether it was the life God gave or the Rev's blasphemous version, I neither knew nor cared. Caroline had skin so white the veins showed through, little rivers of life.

When she finished undressing, she came for me. I blessed the providence that made me wash that morning, as if I hadn't been doing it every morning since I first saw Caroline hanging on Prettyboy's arm. She leaned so close her hair swung to touch my face as she unbuttoned my shirt, and then her hand was flat on my chest, warmer than the sun. Her eyes met mine and slid away.

"Lie back," she said, pressing me down on the bed. She unlaced my work boots, let them drop, and pulled my pants off. She climbed onto the bed beside me and reached across me to turn off the light.

In the darkness, she said, "I killed him." She let about an acre of silence go by while I thought about that. "He don't even know it. I killed him, and when I heard about the Reverend -- I thought if only I had Walter brought back, it would make everything all right, but it didn't. How can he forgive me for something he don't even know I done?"

I thought about my wife, the last time I saw her. White clothes staining to red, eyes lost in bruises. I had watched the color seep out of her face, and listened to her last breath.

I slid my arm around Caroline's shoulders.

She leaned over me in the darkness. Her tongue touched my chest. I thought, maybe I'm wrong. Maybe there is a Heaven.

The Earth Wire

by Joel Lane

Walter de la Mare's writings have been an influence on a select group of later horror writers -- among them, Robert Aickman, Ramsey Campbell, M. John Harrison, and Joel Lane. Born in Exeter in 1963, Joel Lane grew up in Birmingham, studied at Cambridge, and is once again living in Birmingham, where he is working as a proofreader. Lane has earlier appeared in The Year's Best Horror Stories: XV with his story, "The Foggy, Foggy Dew." Since then, Lane writes: "I've had stories published in Aklo, Fantasy Tales and Panurge, and poems in various small magazines. 'The Earth Wire' follows on the-matically from 'The Foggy, Foggy Dew': different characters, but a similar idea. The story is dedicated to Mark Cornfield, a disc-jockey, who inspired it."

For the benefit of American readers, the British use "earth" where we would use "ground" in terms of electricity.

And in terms suggested in my introduction to Nina Kiriki Hoffman's story in these pages, Joel Lane is a sniper.

Geoff's first encounter with the unknown had been when he found his parents' house burned out, and the street already in the process of demolition. He hadn't known what to expect, of course, returning so soon after the disturbances. The area hadn't changed that much. It was north of Birmingham, part of the confusion of little towns and industrial wasteland that was still called the Black Country, after the factory-based conurbation of the old days. The old communities had declined with the closure of the small industries, mostly car-related, that had formed their ground. In spite of projects of redevelopment, no new imprint had really taken hold. Asian small businesses had filled a few of the economic and territorial gaps, like metal in a decaying line of teeth. The present landscape was a mosaic of elements juxtaposed without any kind of underlying pattern. In the gaps, the traces of the past were still visible: the network of disused canals and railways, dating from the Industrial Revolution.

This much, Geoff had grown up with, and observed on his intermittent visits home over the past seven years. It still made him feel lost, a prisoner of his own adolescence. Even when away, he could sense himself picking through the same jigsaw of pieces that didn't fit together. After the disturbances he'd felt compelled to visit his parents, if only to confirm that that part of his life was still in place. It wouldn't be long before the postal and telephone services were put back to rights,

but in the meantime all he could do was take the train up from Surrey. Living in the countryside, he had escaped the worst of the past few months. London, Birmingham and the North had been most badly affected, he knew. The imposition of martial law had coincided with a breakdown of general order. In other major cities, riots had turned into open civil warfare. Now, according to the newspapers, order had been restored; but many travel routes and communications were blocked off. In isolated districts, violence between gangs was still escalating. Meanwhile, the majority of peaceful citizens had gone back to work, waiting for news of the international situation.

On the train, Geoff had been unnerved by the silent young men in green uniforms who restlessly patrolled the carriages for want of anything else to do. From their faces, you might have thought they were outlaws, not soldiers. But most people looked like that these days; it came from living on your nerves, not knowing what or who could be counted on. Near home, the recent disorder was visible in details: smashed windows, wrecked cars, shops boarded up. Soldiers or armed police stood in little groups on street corners or traffic islands, watching. There was little activity in the streets; it was a Sunday morning in January, still and clear.

On the corner opposite the street where Geoff had been born, a chorus of massed voices sounded from the little church with its metallic Christ nailed to a concrete slab. He couldn't remember that place ever having had much of a congregation. Its narrow stained-glass windows were protected by wire grids. The voices divided into nervous fragments before unifying for another phase of certainty. As Geoff walked away, the reality filled his view before his mind could make sense of it. The street opposite was mostly burned down. His parents' house was just recognizable, a hulk of carbon boarded up against the daylight. The door and its number were gone. The street was being systematically demolished from the far end; for now, the machines stood idle, seeming too large for the fragile structures they were intended to bring down.

Geoff walked back to the church and let the communal voice fill his head for a few moments. Then he went back down the road, checking its name, confirming that his parents' home was among those burned out, even if he had misidentified the building itself. Beyond the demolition machines, two lines of shops pointed back toward the town center. From that direction, an old man was walking an Alsatian along the road; Geoff greeted him. "Do you know what happened up there in Tulson Road?" he asked.

"There was a fire," was the answer, "don't know how. That was in

November, you know. When all the trouble was. Nothing could get through the bloody roads, with all the crowds and the fighting. Could have been that that started it. A petrol bomb. Or the army trying to show who was boss. Only kids, half of them."

"Were many people killed?" Geoff thought of the silent Christmas that had followed the uprisings, most of the postal service suspended. There was no reliable way of getting in touch with anyone in the cities, and snowstorms made all the travel problems worse. People were said to have starved in some areas.

"You mean in the fire? Nobody took much notice at the time. I think they evacuated most of the houses, though. But God knows where they can all have ended up. In those army hostels you read about now, maybe. Why, you from round here?"

"Yes," Geoff said. "My parents lived in Tulson Road. Their house is gone."

The old man stared at him, as if really seeing him for the first time. "That's a shame. They could still be around, you know. You want to make enquiries. Try some of the hospitals, maybe. They wouldn't be there any more, but you might be able to trace them. Good luck." The Alsatian edged past Geoff suspiciously and accompanied his owner toward the remains of Tulson Road. Geoff headed back toward the town center. But the further he walked, the more his own past seemed to detach itself from him. It was all at the edge of his vision, coming apart, instead of being part of himself. The landscape itself felt unreal and enclosed on its own hidden purposes. Advertising boards screened off patches of wasteland; posters claimed the walls of derelict buildings. He walked around the town center for an hour, unable to convince himself that he had once lived here.

At the end of the morning, people emerged from the churches and disappeared into their homes. Nobody was even playing football in the park. Geoff walked passed the line of poplar trees there, held onto the railings and looked over the expanse of thin grass that was lightly tinted with frost. He wished he could take cover inside his own childhood. He had never felt lost then.

The same impulse directed him onto the canal system, and an endless stony network that led nowhere but onto renewed outgrowths of itself. At least there were no soldiers here. Railings, factory walls and rough, impassable slopes narrowed the towpath; the water was dark and static, reflecting nothing. Here and there a few thin patches of ice hardened the surface. Geoff wandered in a vague, purposeless state through dirty stone tunnels and over small iron bridges. Eventually, that stretch of canal ended at a wooden lock. Above this, a boy was

standing on a footbridge and looking down onto half a mile or so of water. Geoff climbed up to share the view. He felt weary and confused. It was mid-afternoon and he had not eaten since morning. That, and a hint of the coming darkness, made the canal below appear black and without limit, a gap in the world.

The youth was looking at him. He was about seventeen, of average height and build, wearing black jeans and a waterproof gray jacket with a zip. He looked vaguely familiar, perhaps like someone whom Geoff had been to school with. His hair was black and cropped short but unevenly; his face was pale, as though he were unused to daylight. "You're in trouble, aren't you?" he said. Geoff gazed down at the dark water. The wooden handrail of the bridge shook as he leant on it. He looked back; the boy's face held a complex burden of patience and sadness. His eyes were an unusually deep blue, the color of stained glass. "Why not talk to me?"

"What's been going on here?" Geoff said. "I haven't been back here since all the trouble in November. My parent's house is burned down. I don't know where they are. But everything's upside down and I simply... don't know where to start..." He pulled at the handrail as if he could tear it free as a weapon. His chest was shaking with a grief still locked in his body. His face tightened, but only the cold reached it; and there was no feeling of relief, only the annoyance of having lost his self-control in front of a stranger.

"Look," the boy said, "I can tell you something about how things have gone here. Maybe I can help you reconnect yourself. All I do these days is watch and listen. And talk to people. I've lost my parents, too. They died three years ago. I live in their flat, partly. And partly on the canal, in a boat. That's where I sleep. It's out of harm's way... You look like you've been awake all night. Did you just get here today?"

"Yes, this morning. I've been walking around for hours. I'll have to go back. Can't stay at my parents', can I?"

The boy thought for a moment. "I'll take you round to the flat. You can sit down there and talk for a bit. I'll find you something to eat. You look hungry. My name's Mark, by the way." He led Geoff downhill onto a crowded estate of little terraced houses, a few decades old. The house facing it shadowed Mark's house; it had an air of preserved age, which it no doubt owed to the perpetual lack of light. His flat was the upper floor of the house; the stairs began a few feet back from the front door. "You can't really tell what's new and what's old round here, can you?" Mark said. "Whatever they build turns just like everything else in a few years."

Upstairs it was cold and dim. "There's no electric here," Mark explained. "I

use batteries for most things -- radio, torch, clock. There's a paraffin cooker here, and a heater on the boat. Otherwise nothing." He coughed. The floor was scattered with bits of electrical circuits: wires, batteries, fuses and less identifiable components. "That's my hobby. I mend radios, things like that. I used to have a Citizens' Band radio. But everything like that has been outlawed now. So I'm trying to fix the radio on my boat to pick up stray frequencies. I lie there at night, wandering over the airwaves. Listening for all the drifting voices of the lost ones." He struck a match and lit the paraffin stove in the corner of the room. Its bluish light circled his dark head for a moment like an aura.

Geoff sat in a dusty chair and fought off all the questions that clustered around him. He focused on the wavering cone of light: blue at its heart, then purple, mauve, flickering red at its edges. Mark's eyes were points of color in a blurred face. He took off his coat; underneath, he was wearing a pale shirt and braces. His arms and hands were thin in proportion to his body. He carried on talking; evidently glad to have company, as he heated up a tin of soup. Geoff listened, bemused, to this voice that seemed to consist of a throng of submerged partial voices, that talked with and against itself.

The soup boiled; Mark poured it into a cup, drank a mouthful, and passed the rest to Geoff. "Electricity is fascinating," he was saying. "It does almost everything in the city. People live by it, yet they've got no idea how it works. And it can do all kinds of damage as well. You'll probably see the Wheel tonight. But an electric current is like any kind of power. It has a natural tendency to hurt people." He picked up a plug from the floorboards and opened it swiftly with a screwdriver. "You know what the middle wire is? The earth wire. Right. The plug can work without it. It's just a safety device. The conscience of the circuit. True?" Geoff asked what the Wheel was. "You'll know when you see it," was the only answer.

The room darkened, shrinking around the flame of the stove. "Some awful things are happening," Mark said quietly. "Give me time, I might understand them. I'm just a watcher and a listener. Nobody has any peace these days. Before the soldiers came in, there were gangs fighting the police. Now, there's like another army. Young people with no power, only a charge. And a need to hurt. They've called on resources no community should know about. I think all the things that kept people together have been turned against them. There's no community now. Only the mob. Anyone who's different gets... reversed. Made into carbon. Imagine shouting No, denying at the top of your voice. Then imagine doing that No to someone. Last, imagine being that No forever, all the way through." The voice dissolved into a fit of coughing. Mark's body was contorted with the force of it.

When the boy looked up, his face was luminous with sweat. He pulled on his coat and zipped it up.

"Let's go," he said. "I'll show you where my boat is. We'll be back in time to see the Wheel." Geoff stood up and followed Mark back downstairs and through the narrow streets toward the canal. By now, he was worried about Mark's condition as well as about whatever they were going to witness. But the sense of displacement still clung to him, leaving him helpless. A single white streetlamp illuminated the stretch of canal where Mark's boat was moored, a few yards below road level. It was a short black barge with windows around a central cabin; navy blue curtains were drawn along the sides. Mark and Geoff climbed onto the barge and sat on the roof, waiting for it to stop rocking. By now, night was settling all around. In the lamplight, the ripples spreading on the canal surface looked like silver wires.

"I sleep here at night," the boy said. "It's quiet and peaceful out here. Just me and the radio, and the canal water transmitting the murmurs from the past. I keep lots of old things inside, by the bunk. Notebooks, photographs, tapes, newspapers. Everything I can remember, everything people tell me, ends up here." They could see along the shining distance of still water to the next bridge; and to one side, the flaking wall of a disused factory. To the other side, a railway cutting fell down into the darkness. The street-lamp outlined the whitewashed metal footbridge that linked them to the road, several yards overhead; from below, it seemed too bright and delicate to be real.

Mark stared intently into the surrounding gloom. "I could walk along here with you," he muttered, "and tell you who built everything, and when. How every bridge was designed, how they set the stones, who opened the factories and who shut them down. I heard a song about it once. You know it? Their mark on this land is still seen and still laid, the way for a commerce where vast fortunes were made. The supply of an Empire where the sun never set, which is now deep in darkness but the railway's there yet. It's true. This area's another residue where the glacier of profit stopped and melted a little before it passed on, a long time ago. If you lie here long enough, you can hear the stone and metal still going on about it." His eyes were the same intense blue as the paraffin flame, dissolving into black at their centers.

Looking out onto the canal, as the last traces of daylight turned to iron, Geoff began to see a few unstable outlines. As they moved they took up light and became more complex, more nearly alive. They struggled and turned into figures. Now he could see men working on the bridge and the railway, opening the lock at

the head of the canal, crowding out of the factory doors. Water poured into the canal from the open lock; waste flowed down from the channels in the factory wall. Off to the side, he could see women coming home from their jobs, cleaning and cooking in their houses; he could see children playing in the web of streets, and throwing stones into the canal. There was something almost terrible in the intensity of this scene, composed as it was of grains of color moving against the common darkness of water and sky. Geoff closed his eyes and heard the violent beating of his own heart.

In a few moments everything became quiet and still again. Geoff sat up, and felt the boat tremble. Mark was blinking into the lamplight, confused. "God, that was a strange dream," he murmured, and gripped Geoff's hand momentarily. "We'll fall off here if we're not careful." As clumsily as if the cold had got into their limbs, the two climbed down onto the towpath. Something slowed Geoff's movements and made him feel distant from this situation. Had he been able to find the words, he might have called it the possessive hold of memory, the way it resisted change. But it made no sense for him to feel like that about his parents, now of all times. Nor about Mark, when he'd only known him a few hours.

He needed to be alone for a minute, to regain his perspective. "Do you want something to eat?" he asked the boy. Mark shook his head; he was busy fastening the boat's moorings. Geoff remembered passing a shop just up the road. "Wait here," he said.

"I'll be back in a few minutes." Out of sight of the canal, he had a feeling of relief. The small Asian-run chip shop had several other customers. A group of teenagers stood round a video game, one playing, the others watching. Geoff waited by the counter, reassured by the sense of anonymity. He could hear the distant contention of voices; they were in his head, he imagined, until he noticed the shop's owner looking past him at the window. The narrow street was filled with people. Hurriedly, the teenagers left the shop to join them. Geoff crossed to the glass door and looked out. They weren't soldiers, just a crowd of youths all going in the same direction. He could hear angry voices, but no chorus.

As rapidly as it had filled, the road emptied again. "Where are they going?" Geoff asked. "Who are they?" The Asian shop owner was still looking outward, not moving. The video game flashed and buzzed nervously. The pale strip light by the window superimposed the interior on the view. The darkness outside was an impersonal pressure that felt charged with threat.

"Over the canal," the shop owner said at last. "They're just a gang of hooligans. Or they were. There are more of them every day. I don't know why the

soldiers don't stop them. The soldiers interfere in everything else." He turned away and began stacking cans and boxes behind the counter. His hands were unsteady, but an effort of concentration kept him from knocking anything over. Geoff hoped the man wouldn't mind him leaving without buying anything. He had to catch up with the group. Mark would know what they were up to.

He got back to the canal just in time to see the last of the crowd disappearing along the towpath, under and around the bridge. Near his barge, Mark was sprawled at the water's edge. He had fallen down; one of his hands gripped the metal ring that the mooring-rope was tied to. Geoff turned him over; he was breathing heavily, and bleeding from his mouth. His eyes opened. "I'm all right," he said. "They knocked me over, that's all." He coughed hard and sat up. There was mud on the arm and shoulder of his coat from the ground. He held onto Geoff's arm and pulled himself to his feet, then stood very still, as though he were about to fall again. His face was passive, lost to thoughts that nobody could share.

Then he knelt, dipped a hand in the murky water, and wiped the blood from his mouth. "This is the Wheel," he said. "We can go and watch if you want. You ought to see it once." Picking his way carefully in the poor light, he led Geoff down the towpath, then up into a maze of side streets and bridges where the canal and railway network had been overlaid with a perpetuation of the town. More strongly than before, Geoff could feel the tension that the gang left in its wake -- a stillness heavy with anger, like a cloud that was about to turn itself inside-out and discharge its secret violence in one blinding shock. They caught up with the mob at a crossroads, where a valley in one plane coincided with a hilltop in another. His father would have called it a saddle-point, Geoff reflected.

There was rain in the air now, a vague drizzle that could be felt only when it settled against the skin, and only seen when it made the pavements reflect the lamplight. From a distance, Geoff and Mark watched the crowd of youths gather closer together at the crossroads. There were about a hundred of them; some were older than Geoff, some younger than Mark. There were women among them, though not many. The crowd would block off any traffic. But no soldiers or police came to break them up. They were completely quiet now, drawn toward some common purpose. Geoff's chest tightened as he saw that their focus was a prisoner: someone half-lifted in the middle of the gang, his arms held apart. His face was gagged, and there was a rope around his neck being used to prevent him from struggling. Geoff pressed himself back in the shadow of the wall, trying to make himself smaller; and to make the image smaller, reduce it to a television screen, a photograph. The boy was silent beside him, watching.

On the far side of the crossroads, the wire fence had been torn down from in front of a power generator. Between the red DANGER sign and the two black tanks set in the ground, some kind of machine had been installed. As far as Geoff could see, it was a metal cross-supported on a crude motor, which was connected to the generator by heavy black cables. Some of the crowd was chanting now, but out of unison; Geoff could not make out any of the words. Two men tied the prisoner to the iron cross, which was then tilted backward to free it from the ground. Now he was suspended in mid-air, unable to move; his arms and legs were stretched out in a regular X. Throughout this process he had shown no sign of resistance. The nearest of the crowd to the center drew back. A mist of raindrops hung in stasis between the sodium lamps and the pavement, increasing Geoff's sense of being witness to something detached from reality.

Everyone was looking at the helpless figure, directing their tension inward to the crossroads. Violence flickered in the air like dark moths; energy twitched the wires of falling rain. But nothing happened, and the mob was as passive as their victim. Then his gag started to burn. His face was obscured by smoke as the cross began turning. Sparks jumped between the limbs, hissing. Then the motor was coughing with life, and the cross was spinning into a blur of crimson and blue flame. The air became dense with the mixed odors of burning materials: rubber, paint, flesh and cloth. That and the drifting smoke made Geoff feel drugged to the point of insensitivity. The Wheel dimmed, its blackened weight appearing massive as it stopped moving. The face was no longer distinct. Without a focus, the crowd drifted apart uneasily. Some of them stood as though lost, taken over by the night that pressed in from all directions.

In minutes, they had dispersed entirely, leaving only the outstretched figure that had formed the center of the gathering. At a distance, what was visible looked like the negative image of one of Blake's angels. "Who was it?" Geoff asked.

"Nobody," the boy answered. "Could have been anyone." As they walked back toward the canal, he added, "You'll see it again. Happens all the time now. But we saw it together. That means neither of us can go away and say he didn't see it. True?" When they reached the towpath, they were alone. Mark leaned on Geoff's arm for support. "I need to rest a bit," he said. They stopped at a bench lit from overhead. The rain had intensified, darkening their coats. Geoff held the boy's shoulders while he shook with a fit of coughing.

More than rain was visible in the air now. Ashes were blowing toward them across the canal, like creased snowflakes of carbon. Where they struck Geoff's face and hands they felt clinging, permanent. He felt as though his own core had been

blackened, and the night had come in to claim all of his memories, his debts, and his future. Mark was whispering something in a tired but urgent voice. "It all goes on and on," he was saying; "the more you take in, the more gets taken out of you. I'm just a watcher and a listener... I can't change anything. I can't even tell you where to look, or who to go to. I'm losing myself, that's why... Nothing in my lungs but pollution and bad dreams." His words dissolved into a kind of helpless choking; he pressed a handkerchief into his mouth. It came away deep red. That could be a disease or an internal wound; Geoff couldn't tell which.

A breeze caught the stained handkerchief and made it flutter. The rain diluted the blood, running it through the boy's fingers. The color washed out with unnatural speed; within a minute the cloth was entirely white. Perhaps there was some active chemical in the rain. Or, Geoff realized, perhaps the blood was not as material as it looked. Mark clenched his fist. He was trembling with cold; his eyes stared at something in the distance. "We ought to get you to a hospital," Geoff said.

Mark shook his head and smiled briefly. "Just get me back to the boat," he said. "I'll feel better when things have changed a little. You should understand that by now." The strength was coming back into his voice. He leaned nearer to Geoff; close up, his eyes appeared blue-black, like bruises. "But what are you going to do?" he asked. "You still don't know where to start, do you? Everything you see here makes you want to run away. You see your parents everywhere, and instead of looking for them, you're looking for a way to get free of them. All you want is something else, somewhere else. Do you wonder you can't begin to work out what it is?"

Several minutes passed in silence. Mark's face seemed to undergo conflict from within; it gave way to a community of faces, old and young, male and female. Then he regained himself. "Make contact somewhere," he said quietly. "If you give yourself up to everyone, you'll be torn apart. But if you hold off too long, you'll never be able to earth yourself. You're like a Catherine wheel, spinning instead of moving. True? Plug in somewhere, connect yourself." He reached up and touched Geoff's cheek; a fragile pulse of warmth passed through his fingertips.

Soon after, Geoff was standing alone on the canal towpath, looking at the black barge with its curtains drawn against the lamplight. He had helped Mark walk back to his boat and climb inside. As Geoff had last seen him, the boy was lying on his side in the narrow bunk, turning the knob on the radio endlessly back and forth in search of the wavelength by which the dead spoke. It was a small portable radio, run on batteries, and weakened by Mark's recurrent tinkering with its circuits. "Be careful," were Mark's final words to him. Geoff stood beside the

still barge for an hour or more, knowing that he had no reason to stay.

When he began to walk, his limbs felt mechanical and foreign. The empty night stripped him of identifying features. Whatever had kept him waiting by the boat faded into the blur of the thoughts that could not be remembered. In the distance, a few city lights shone yellow and silver. They looked nearer than they were. Geoff thought of the Wheel, flaming with all the vivid colors of terror and denial; and he thought of the red handkerchief whitening faster than a person could die. At the first bridge, he turned back and tried to make out the shape of the barge against the dark water. He fought off the impression that it was being carried away into the distance by water currents. This was a canal, not a river. Nothing moved here. Indeed, nothing much had changed here in a hundred years.

Sponge And China Tea

by D.F. Lewis

During the late 1960s, August Derleth offered one of the few markets for aspiring horror writers, either through his Arkham House anthologies or his house magazine, The Arkham Collector. As aspiring horror writers of that time were generally writing Lovecraftian pastiches, Derleth was the perfect mentor as well as fearless publisher. Ramsey Campbell, Brian Lumley, and David Drake are writers in this book who benefited from Derleth's advice and early publication of their work. D.F. Lewis would have been another, but after Derleth rejected two of Lewis' stories in 1968 as being "pretty much pure grue," Lewis dropped out of sight for twenty years. Hey, we all get rejection slips.

Since then, Lewis has decided to make up for lost time, with some seventy-five stories published over the last three years, mostly in the British small press. He has gained a vocal following there, and "Sponge and China Tea" is reprinted from a special D.F. Lewis issue of the British small press magazine, Dagon. Lewis seems to have recovered with a vengeance. The author currently resides in Coulsdon, Surrey and has two teenaged children.

John crept into my life when I was at my lowest ebb, with my fireguard missing and other defenses dropped. I had just spent the last two years or so caring for my sick mother, a rather messy affair ending in inevitable tears, men in tall hats and black suits and a convoy of dark limousines winding through the town. Don't get me wrong, I loved my mother dearly and still do of course. And, really, at that time, it was because of that love, I was pleased to watch her gradually depart this life for what she had in fact told me would be a better place, especially as a result of her arrival there. The body wherein she lived toward the end had been little better than a wrinkled sack of rattling bones, which sometimes spoke up for itself with a voice I no longer recognized.

I became a bag of nerves myself. I even slept on tenterhooks. My own spine felt like a giant rotting tooth, as I rocked her from side to side in desperate attempts to prevent bedsores forming. The anxiety became worse and worse, as unconfirmed reports of her state of death became more and more common from the various doctors I had got in to see her. In the end, I slept in the same bed so that I would be there if life returned, albeit momentarily. Finally, I determined that life would never show its face again in that swamp of flesh that the mattress had become.

That's when I called in the black suits and the limousines. My diagnosis was final.

I sat in the back of the hearse with the coffin (which I had asked specially should be made of steel), amid a flurry of meadow flowers and holly wreaths. I myself felt I was a demure bloom, done up in a black headscarf as I was. I wished I had chosen to wear the wild lace veil of which my mother had been so fond (and still is, no doubt), but I had burnt that with the rest of her clothes upon a huge bonfire in the backyard, in a fit of catharsis.

As the hearse horse-paced through those remnant streets of our old town that it had not yet toured, I was becoming tired of acknowledging all the gentlemen who stood in attention along the yellow lines, each wearing hats specifically for raising in respect as mother and I passed.

It was then I saw John smiling straight into my eyes. Large as life, he was. I recalled him from schooldays, when we had shared a double-desk: you know the sort, with the sloping lids. Odd moments of communication had rarely interrupted the studied mutual stand-offishness -- but I know I had always liked the way he smiled, with even teeth more sparkling than a TV advert. And, again, it was the power of his smile that struck me that day, when I had no protection, least of all the knowing of my own mind.

He visited me soon afterward, leaving it a few days as a mark of patience. He came without appointment, interrupting my afternoon nap with a loud cannonade upon my knocker. I had been sleeping a lot since the day of the hearses, catching up on two years almost completely without it.

He said he had come to pay his respects to my mother. She had been his Godmother, as she had been with most new arrivals in the town of the male variety. Blinded by the smile, I invited him in to partake of sponge and china tea.

He took off his well-worn hat, bent his head under the top of the doorframe and lingered in the dark hallway for my direction-finding.

It was particularly gloomy at the foot of the stairs: not only was the air dour outside but the bulb in the hall had recently gone.

"What you doing now, John?"

We stood awkwardly -- he not knowing which room to enter, me too bewildered to indicate. And, to my surprise, I had opened the conversation -- small

talk had never previously been my forte.

"I'm in rubber dipped goods."

"That sounds interesting."

"I sell them. You know -- things like diaphragms, slimming trunks, valves, medical sheaths and probes, urinary rubbers, colostomy tubing, diagnostic fingerstalls, sphygmomanometer bulbs, ostomy bags, veterinary gloves, soil test membranes, gaiters, diving hoods, neck and cuff seals, pneumatic face masks, shot blast capes, helmet covers, incontinence stockings, specialized prophylactics..."

The list was mesmerizing, so much so I did not appreciate the imbecility of detailing such items as part of small talk. He had to lightly support my elbow to prevent me swaying in the darkness.

"If you tell me where the kitchen is, I'll make the tea. Sorry, I forget your name..."

"Dell. We sat together at school..."

"Yes, yes, Dell. I believe we did."

From that day on, he visited me often: he said he liked my class of afternoons. Quiet, contemplative, china tinkling. He spoke of my mother as if she were alive, which, of course, to me, she is. I would stay in the parlor, whilst he went up to her bedroom and paced about, much like she used to do in the old days. He thought it gave me great comfort. He even offered to dress up like my mother. But I said that would never do. In any event, I had burnt all the clothes. He could buy duplicates, he said. No, that would never do, I maintained.

Sometimes, he showed me his wares. He had a large soft suitcase in the boot of his old Bentley, which, on toting it inside, he would open with a creaking lid. Its elasticated lining and inner compartments contained neat rows of diverse rubber products, some as small as my fingernail, others big enough to skin a whole body. He handled them delicately, even lovingly, as he would expensive crockery: he stretched them slowly over his hands to show them off to the best advantage. I did not like, however, the way the tongue flopped from his mouth, as he concentrated on his mock sales demonstration.

Looking back at it, I find it hard to believe. My defenses were low, true. My heart was not in anything. But was that reason enough to allow him to use me the way he eventually did? I was little better than a tailor's dummy to him, I guess. He said he wanted to test out his goods on reliable property.

So, between the stirrings of the tea and of the smoldering coals in the parlor grate, I felt his eyes undressing me, sizing me up, though I did not then exactly think of it in that way. I felt honored, basking in his smile (which actually lit up the room with its glint) and, for the first time for many years, I felt a stirring in my loins as well.

I knew deep within me that it would only be a matter of time before he required more than just eyes to undress me. Massaging my toes before using them to stretch his rubber thimbles into shape would surely not be enough for him at the end of the day.

Finally, I told him not to come any more. My resources were back, I said, and I could see through him. He looked sad, rather than angry, as he left down the garden path, tail between his legs, toting his black suitcase. I nearly called him back. But I could still feel his probing fingers from the afternoon before... the last straw was when he lost one of his thingies. So, I just let him leave, with no further word nor future promise of meeting. His disappearing back looked so pitiful: his smile would no doubt be clamped behind his clenched teeth. But a double-desk, after all, does not warrant loyalty that far...

As it happened, I did not need to worry about loneliness. Mother's come back in body to share my bed, as I once shared hers in a moment of trial. Her print dress is identical to the one I burnt. And the wild lace veil is very fetching. Underneath, she's skinned anew, so fine and supple.

The Boy With The Bloodstained Mouth

by W.H. Pugmire

W.H. Pugmire was born in Seattle, Washington on May 3, 1951, and he has been part of the underground scene there ever since. I mean, who else has managed a fusion of Lovecraftian themes and punk? For many years Pugmire has been popping up in the small press with his poems and short fiction, and he continues to edit a magazine of Lovecraftian fiction. Of his latest excursions, Pugmire says: "My first collection of short stories, most of it Cthulhu Mythos bullshit, will be published by England's Sarcophagus Press. Two of my stories are being illustrated for a local radical underground book, Taboo, illustrated and published by a way cool local beat artist. The cover for Taboo will be a full-frontal nude photograph of myself, surrounded by a home-made guillotine, petrified cat corpses, dead roses, and a harp."

I saw him in the smoky room, leaning against the pockmarked wall, indifferent to the noise and fumes. His thick dark glasses hid his eyes. I do not think he wore them for any reason of fashion. I think they were meant to conceal his eyes.

How I longed to gaze at those eyes. And -- O! -- how my soul trembled at what then might be revealed, there in the eyes of that dark-haired youth.

He raised those unseen orbs to me. I felt certain he had noticed me gazing at him. I was unable to turn my eyes away. He held me spellbound. Black flames of some nameless desire consumed my weary soul.

I went to him.

His hair was chaos, a mess of black and velvet rat tails protruding from the pale flesh of his scalp.

His mouth was stained with fresh blood.

That crimson liquid, gleaming in the misty blue light of the place, drove me mad.

My fingers caressed his brow. His flesh was like ice, as though he burned with death's fever.

He took my hand in his. Leaning toward him, I kissed his lips.

I kissed the boy with the bloodstained mouth. I felt nothing as our lips met, no rush of desire, no sensation of ecstasy.

I backed away, filled with sudden horror. His expression had not altered, but his mouth, his clean unstained mouth, mocked me horribly.

And when I licked my lips, I screamed with ageless terror.

On The Dark Road

by Ian McDowell

Ian McDowell was born in Madison, Wisconsin in 1958, but has spent most of his life in North Carolina -- growing up in Fayetteville and attending the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and at Greensboro, where he is currently working to complete his Ph.D. in English. His fiction has appeared in Ares, Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, and Fantasy Book.

When "On the Dark Road" appeared in The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, the story was dedicated to the late North Carolina author, Manly Wade Wellman. McDowell explains: "After Frances Wellman and I both had stories in Fantasy Book, the Wellmans sent me a gracious letter inviting me to come up for a visit. Unfortunately, I never did, but I later met them both at Chimeracon, where Mr. Wellman and I ended up on a panel. Something he said to me afterwards eventually (several years later) resulted in this story being redrafted in salable form (years before, David Drake bounced a sketchy, truly dreadful first attempt at the same plot with the shortest personal rejection letter I've ever gotten: 'Dear Ian: I've seen worse.')." Here's proof that if at first you don't succeed...

Elias Walkingstick leaned back in his creaking rocker and sucked on his corncob pipe, the sputtering firelight limning the canyons and gullies of his seventy-eight-year-old face. "Years and years and years ago," he began, "before the war and the war before that and the war before that, there was a Cherokee woman who lived alone with her baby up on Bear Ridge.

"Her people had come back from Oklahoma, back from the Trail of Tears, and out there they'd picked up the habit of carrying their children strapped to their backs, the way the plains Indians do. One night, her baby began to cry, and when she picked it up, it seemed warm with fever. But there was no water with which she could cool its brow, for the well had gone dry that very day, and there was nothing for it but to go down the valley to the nearest spring.

"Even sick, she did not want to leave the baby alone in the cabin at night, so she strapped it on her back and started down the trail. The spring she was heading for was in a sacred place, surrounded by tall pines in a valley where no other pine trees grew. But the woman had been long in Oklahoma, and had forgotten the old ways of the hills, and so she was not afraid to take her water there.

"Finally, she came to the spring, and there she filled her bucket, and when she stood up, and made to go, she felt breathing on her neck, and knew something tall was standing right behind her. And a voice, which didn't sound like anything she'd ever heard, whispered in her ear, and this is what it said:

" 'Woman, you take water from my sacred place. Now I will take something of your own.'

"A white woman would have screamed or fainted or even turned around, but she was Cherokee, for all her Oklahoma ways, and more sensible than that. Instead, she bolted like a deer, running up the trail as fast as her strong legs could carry her.

"And when she was safe in her cabin, with the door barred and the shutters latched, she unstrapped her baby and went to unwrap his blankets. And there was blood on the blankets, and she began to scream, for that was when she found that the baby's head had been bitten clean off."

Jesus Christ, thought Steve, stopping the tape and shifting uncomfortably on the hardwood floor. Beside him, Monica sat perfectly still, her elbows on her kneecaps and her eyes half-closed, the firelight shimmering off her straight black hair. "God," he whispered to her, "this is such cheerful stuff you're collecting."

As usual, she ignored him. "Bitten off? By what?"

Mr. Walkingstick smiled, exposing surprisingly good dentures. "Who can say?" He took another puff on his pipe. "Nowdays, they call the whole valley where that spring was Callie Hollow, and make like it's named after some old white woman named Callie who used to live there. Actually, Callie just comes from the old Cherokee word, Tsulkala. Maybe that's what done it, the Tsulkala."

Steve leaned back against the warm stones of the hearth wall, surreptitiously running his index finger down the inside of Monica's jeans-covered thigh. Shifting her weight, she moved away from his hand. Irritated, he looked at Mr. Walkingstick and tried to smile. "Soocallie? What's that?"

"Suhl-ca-la," corrected Monica before the old man could answer. "It's some kind of local woods spirit or demon. A shape shifter."

He'd heard that term in the movie on HBO the other night -- either *Wolfen* or *The Howling* -- he was always getting those two mixed up. "You mean, like a werewolf?"

"No," said Monica with pedantic patience. "More like the Algonquin

manitou. It can take on the form and personality of anything it wants to -- the deer you've spent half a day tracking up a mountain, the black horse you find in your stable at night, the strange woman you meet on the road. Even people you know."

Mr. Walkingstick nodded. "In some stories, it can look like them and talk like them and tell you things only they could tell you."

"Oh, like a Cherokee version of The Thing."

Monica looked pained, as she always did when he mentioned the things he knew about. His enthusiasm for popular culture clearly embarrassed her. Sometimes he thought he embarrassed her. One day he meant to have a talk with her about that. After all, it was not his hobby, it was his field, for Christ's sake, a field just as valid as hers. He never made fun of her for studying old folklore.

Mr. Walkingstick interrupted his brooding. "If you're interested in the Tsulkala, I know another story about the critter."

Monica smiled that peculiar smile that changed her face from horsey to striking. "Yes, please. Turn the tape back on, Steve."

"It's getting late. Your parents will worry."

"Let them. My dissertation is worth it."

Knowing better than to argue, he put a new cassette in the machine.

"Not long after the war they fought to free the slaves," began Mr. Walkingstick, shifting back into his formal, story-telling mode, "there was a white family that lived down on the creek that runs through what they now call Callie Hollow. One evening, when the cicadas were first singing and the air was starting to get cool, they were just sitting down to supper when there was a knock at the door, and in walked the local circuit preacher, all tall and thin and wearing his black suit and big black hat. They weren't glad to see him, not being terribly Godly folk, but they made him a place anyway, and he took a seat, all without a word or a nod or even a tilt of his head.

"And there he sat, not taking off his hat, or speaking, or eating the food they pushed in front of him. Figuring he was touched, they went about wolfing down then- stew, and were just pushing their plates away when the door busted open and a cousin came running in.

"It seems some neighbor had found the Reverend's trap wagon up on the ridge, with his black suit on the seat all in tatters, and pieces of the Reverend in the

tatters. So who was sitting in front of them, looking like the Reverend and dressed like him, and wearing his hat at table?

"Right then, the stranger cleared his throat, and looking at him, everybody found they couldn't move, that they were as fast in their seats as if they'd been nailed there, as stiff as the sparrow when the black-snake looks him in the eye. And the stranger stood up, stood up taller in the firelight than the Reverend could ever stand, so tall his big hat brushed the roof beams, and his eyes were glowing like the eyes of a bobcat in a birch tree when you shine your lantern at the branches. And this is that he said:

" 'Here you all are, with your bellies fat and full of food and my belly empty, and what shall I have for my supper?'

"Couple of days later, a traveling man found the door open and no family in the cabin, just bits of cloth and chewed bone all over the floor, and under the table, all their shoes, with all their feet still in them."

Mr. Walkingstick leaned back and shut his eyes like a musician waiting for applause. "Y'know, Monica," said Steve, not bothering so much to whisper this time, "I think I prefer the stories you used to get, the ones about buried treasure, and skeletons in the graveyard, and black horses with red eyes at the crossroads at night, and ghost trains, and the devil showing up at poker games. All those stories are Disney material compared to this."

She actually moved closer to him and gave his thigh a squeeze, reassuring him for once. "Don't be a wussie," she said, but the gesture cut the harshness out of the words.

Getting up, she stretched her lanky frame before the fire. "Thank you very much, Mr. Walkingstick, for the stories. It's material I don't think anyone has collected before."

The old man rose somewhat unsteadily out of his wicker-backed chair. "Well, I thank you and your friend for the visit, Missy -- I don't see many people anymore. Do they really study old tales and such down at the University?"

Monica shook his hand. "Oh, yes, they study all kinds of things these days. They're even letting Steve write his thesis on old comic books and movies."

Steve winced, although he should have gotten used to her jibes by now. "Not just comic books and movies. It's an overview of popular culture."

The old man nodded as if he actually understood what Steve was talking

about. "You want to hear some more stories, you come on back up here any time." He took Steve's hand. His grip was dry and firm and surprisingly strong, and for a moment Steve thought there was going to be a contest to see who would stop squeezing first. "Sure you young people won't stay for supper? I'd be glad to have ye?"

Monica looked at Steve as if she found the idea attractive. You never knew what might appeal to her. "Well...."

"I shot a possum last Monday. Still got most of him in the icebox. It's really tasty with collard greens and sweet taters."

Monica didn't need Steve's imploring glance. "No thanks. We couldn't impose."

"We're on a diet," Steve added weakly.

Mr. Walkingstick nodded. "You diet, boy?"

"Yes, sir."

"What color?"

The old man cackled like a chicken. "That's a joke, son." Steve made himself smile. The calculated folksiness was beginning to grate.

Mr. Walkingstick followed them to the door. "You take good care of this young lady, son."

Somewhat reluctantly, Steve shook his hand again. "Don't worry. I intend to."

Monica laughed. "Actually, I usually have to take care of him."

Mr. Walkingstick shook his head and looked suddenly solemn, like a contemplative turtle. "That's just because he's a stranger here. You go back north with him, to the big cities, and he'll do the looking after you."

Steve smiled. "I don't know about that, but thank you. Right now, I've got to get her back to her parent's house before they have a heart attack." Taking Monica's arm, he stepped through the doorway and out onto the gravel path. Mr. Walkingstick shut the door behind them.

Outside, the air was surprisingly cold. The car was a dark shape on the pale river of the dirt road, with the elms and birches a darker mass behind. Something

moved on the gravel, causing Steve to recoil. "Jesus, a snake!"

Monica calmly took a penlight flashlight out of her purse. "Where?"

He pointed. The light picked up a thick shape with a blunt head and raised snout coiling on the flinty pebbles. Monica walked to it.

"Careful," he warned, "It might be poisonous."

She kneeled and poked at it. "It's a hognose, out looking for toads. They're not poisonous; in fact, they never even bite. Watch." She poked it again and it rolled limply on its side. She picked it up.

"Instead, they play dead. See? It's like the poor thing's fainted."

She advanced with it and he took a step backwards, almost off the path. "Put it down or I'll faint, too."

She laughed, but not meanly, and put the snake down. "Steve, you are such a wimp," she said, walking toward him.

They embraced. "I love it when you call me names," he said, just glad that she was touching him. A gastric rumble interrupted their kiss.

She pulled away. "What the hell was that?"

"My stomach, mad that I skipped lunch."

She pulled him close and bent her head to kiss him. "Poor baby. We'll just have to get you something to eat on the way back."

"Do we have time? You parents...."

"Can worry all they want. You need to be fed." She kissed him again and he was happy.

The neon sign atop the diner advertised: PIZZA MOUNTAIN TROUT. Steve wondered if it was a single dish -- fried fish on pizza crust with tomato paste and mozzarella cheese, maybe with black olives in the eye sockets. He hated the way all the little restaurants on the parkway served rainbow trout with the head still on and the eyes looking at you. Inside, he ordered a burger.

There was a glass case full of imitation Cherokee artifacts beside the cash register, while the walls were decorated with folksy sayings like "Chief Redman

says: Don't speak evil of your neighbor until you've walked a mile in his moccasins." The red Formica table had several old mustard stains on it.

"Mr. Walkingstick is a very accomplished storyteller," said Monica, sipping her Diet Pepsi. "Maybe too accomplished."

"What do you mean?" He absentmindedly squeezed the bottle of ketchup, which was shaped like a squaw in a blanket, a Cherokee Mrs. Butterworth. A bubble of the thin red liquid appeared atop the figure's head, making her look as if she'd been scalped.

"His stories are too polished, almost literary. That means they may not be authentic folk tales."

"Really?"

She nodded. "I remember once when I was Dr. Corum's graduate assistant. He was doing a book on Appalachian 'jump tales,' and I was helping him record them. There was one old preacher up near Boone who told this great story about a mean old man who was looking for a buried treasure that was supposed to be sunk at the bottom of this abandoned well. The only trouble was, the well had some kind of demon guarding it."

She lit a cigarette, which annoyed him, as she'd once again promised to quit. "Okay, at the climax of the story, the old man was out by the well at midnight, pulling on this wet, slimy rope that went down into the water, and feeling something heavy on the other end. Just then the moon went behind some clouds, and he couldn't see anything, but he kept on pulling. Whatever it was at the end of the rope got stuck under the lip of the well, so he reached down and got his hands under what felt like a big, wet canvas bag, full of mud and maybe something else. He'd just got it up to the level of his face when the thing that felt like a bag reached out and put its arms around his neck."

She looked at him and grinned, waiting for a reaction. He smiled. "It was the demon and it killed him."

"Right. It was also the climax to some old ghost story by someone named James -- not Henry, someone else. The preacher told the same story. In fact, the ending was almost word for word. It turned out they had several collections of classic ghost stories in the Sunday School library."

The waitress brought his hamburger and fries. Despite the bright orange dye in her hair, she looked almost seventy years old. "You want anything, honey?" she

asked Monica.

"Just some water." While she was getting it, Steve took a bite of the hamburger. It tasted like a charred hockey puck. He decided he might have been better off with Mr. Walkingstick's leftover possum. Monica began to steal his fries, but he didn't say anything, even though they were the most edible thing on the plate.

The waitress came back with the water. "Sure you don't want anything, honey? We got some nice pie in the icebox. Some cobbler, too."

Monica shook her head. "No thanks, I'm on a diet." He wondered how she could say that with a straight face between mouthfuls of his fries. "Besides, we have to eat and run -- we're due back in Boone by nine thirty, and it looks like we're going to be late." Fine thing for her to be worrying about that now, he thought.

"You can make it," said the waitress, "if you take the short cut."

"Short cut?" asked Monica. "I didn't know there was one."

"Sure. This highway out here loops around the valley, but old Callie Road cuts right through it. Once you get down the mountain, there aren't any lights, of course, but turn on your high beams and you'll be okay."

"Old Callie Road?"

The waitress nodded. "Take the ramp right here beside the diner -- that turn off between us and the Shell station. Look out for potholes, though. It'll take you straight across the valley, then ends in a dirt road that goes up the far ridge. It was supposed to cut across the edge of the Reservation, too, but there was a big set-to between the county and the tribal council and the federal people, and it never got any further. It was one of those C.C.C. roads Roosevelt's people were building back in the Depression." For a moment, she looked embarrassed. "'Course, that was all before my time, so I don't know much about it."

Monica nodded gravely. "Maybe I will have some of that pie after all," she said, taking Steve's last French fry.

Outside, bats were swooping through the parking lot lights and the cicadas were singing in the trees. Sure enough, there was a road winding down the mountain to the pooled darkness of the valley. Beside it was a railing with several

telescopes, a picnic table, and a lighted sign showing a bonneted old lady pointing and the words CALLIE SAYS: WHOA BUD, THIS VIEW'S TOO GOOD TO MISS.

"Why is the sign lighted?" asked Steve. "You can't see anything at night."

Instead of answering, Monica walked to the railing and stared down at the disappearing line of lights. "Callie Hollow, like in Mr. Walkingstick's story."

Steve nodded. "Right. It's probably full of spirits and demons."

"It could be." She sounded like she took the idea seriously.

"Are you afraid?"

She sat on the railing, already seeming to have forgotten about the need to be back in Boone. Steve wondered what she would do if she didn't have him to herd her around and see she got places on time. "No, I'm not afraid," she answered, still sounding as if she thought his question had been a serious one. "Are you?"

"I'm a city boy, remember?"

"Some of the most superstitious people I've met have been city boys."

"Well, I'm not one of them." An idea struck him; she was always accusing him of being too timid and earnest. "But I know how to deal with spirits and demons."

He jumped up on the picnic table and began to intone, trying to sound like an actor in one of the outdoor dramas so popular here in North Carolina. "Spirits of the mountain, hear me!"

"Steve, don't," she said softly.

He ignored her, determined to carry this through without her making him feel embarrassed. "Hear me, O Spirits of wood and stream. Hear me and give us safe passage through your lands. Leave us unharmed, that we may buy rubber tomahawks and rock candy at the tourist shops of your people, that we may purchase their leather goods at outrageous prices, and get our pictures taken with the Chiefs in the fiberglass teepees on main street, and pay homage to the Live Bears at every service station."

The echo faded, and with it his sudden burst of high spirits. He looked down, feeling stupid again, hoping for a smile but not really expecting one. But Monica wasn't looking at him at all. Her face wore an expression of intense listening.

"What is it?"

"All the cicadas and crickets and the rest -- they just stopped."

He listened. The insect chorus was as loud as ever. "No they haven't."

She shook her head. "No, just for a minute, while you were chanting that stuff. It was like there was a break in the rhythm, or it was all on a big record that skipped a groove."

"I didn't notice." He jumped down and put his arm around her. At least she wasn't mad at him for acting like a clown. "C'mon, we do need to get going." She gave him one brief kiss before she slipped back behind the wheel.

* * *

Not long after they passed the last light pole, the road leveled out, and they were driving a fairly straight two-lane strip of asphalt that ran between dark fields and darker stands of trees. Once, their headlights picked up what Steve at first thought was a pair of Great Danes playing beside the road. As they bounded away, he saw they were baby deer.

Monica drove silently, steering past potholes. He envied her skill with the stick shift, and her ability to navigate treacherous mountain turns. Still, Mr. Walkingstick had a point; get her in a New York traffic jam and she might not be so hot.

He fiddled with the radio dial, catching a few words amid the buzzing. "... sinners... not saved... holy retribution...." Several times, he heard the word AIDS spoken with a particular vehemence.

"Turn it off," said Monica in a tired voice. "All you ever get up here is static and preachers."

She sounded beat. The road was fairly straight and the moon was out, making the landscape ghostly but quite visible. Even he shouldn't have any trouble driving here, he thought. He was about to ask her to pull over and let him take the wheel when they hit the pothole. The car lurched, scraping something on the asphalt, and bounced out the hole. Then a tire blew. They went over the embankment and into the ditch.

Monica turned off the engine. He could hear the night noises, the ever-present cicadas and the rest of the choir, even with the windows rolled up. They sat still, held fast by the seatbelts that had kept them from being thrown into the

dashboard or against the doors, both of them staring straight ahead. "Shit," said Monica after what seemed like a long time.

Steve got out. The car was completely in the ditch, having slid sideways down the grassy bank. It had come to rest on almost level gravel and was pointed parallel to the road. He heard Monica's door open. "Help me with the spare," she said tonelessly.

He immediately felt irritated, like she was trying to prove something. "You can't change the tire here," he said, trying to keep his annoyance out of his voice.

She opened the hatchback and tossed out the jack. "Why not? The car's pretty level and the ground's firm enough."

"Maybe. But we can't drive in the ditch, and we won't get out of it without a tow truck."

"We'll see." She got the tire out without waiting for him to help her.

He gave in. "At least let me do that. That way I'll be the one the car falls on."

She went on jacking up the front end. "I've changed more tires than you have, city boy. Get the dry cell flashlight from the back and set it on the ground beside me."

He did, angling the bulb so it pointed at the wheel. "You always make me feel like Steve Trevor."

"Who?"

"Wonder Woman's boyfriend -- the one who always stood around and looked pretty while she bashed Nazis. Or maybe what's-his-name, the guy who was always in the background holding Sheena of the Jungle's spear while she wrestled with the lion. What was his name?"

She grunted. "How should I know? You're the student of popular culture." Standing up, she removed the flat and sent it rolling down the ditch. "And you think my degree is a worthless one."

He'd never said that, of course, but he didn't want to argue now, not when she was in the middle of her competent woman act. The car seemed to teeter precariously on the jack. He was debating the merits of saying anything when she walked toward him.

"Look, I'm sorry if I'm making you feel like a useless male sidekick. Why

don't you walk down the road past those trees and see if you see any houses?" She pointed to where the road went into a bend that snaked through a stand of pines, obscuring what lay beyond.

"It's not very safe to leave you here."

"You won't be out of earshot. Now go on, while I put on the spare tire. Here, take my penlight." She pressed it into his hand. "And look out for snakes." She kissed him on the cheek.

Feeling like a child sent off to do something useful, he clambered up out of the ditch and started down the road, keeping to the shoulder even though no oncoming car could be within a mile without him hearing it. Behind him, the light of the big dry-cell flash dwindled. His loafers crunched on the gravel.

Something twisted sinuously on the asphalt, its coils black in the moonlight. Wanting to run, he turned the beam on it. It was thin for its length, and did not have the triangular head Monica had once told him to look out for. "It's harmless," he told himself, several times.

He was under the pines now; their smell was very strong. The dark branches creaked, he heard a soft "who?", and then a huge winged shape drifted silently through a patch of moonlight. It was the first time he'd ever seen a wild owl. He kicked a pinecone into the ditch and tried to whistle, but the notes were wrong, and sounded strained and hollow and distant. A cool wind pressed the fabric of his shirt into the small of his back and caused the needles overhead to rustle. Somewhere nearby, frogs were singing, and he heard water bubbling over stones.

The pine canopy was a claustrophobic ceiling, and he was glad when he was out of it. Pausing for a moment, he looked up, at the dark palisades of the surrounding mountains and the necklace of light that was the parkway, then higher, at the stars. Up on the main roads, they'd been blotted out by sodium and neon, almost as much as they were in the city. Not so down here. He felt like he could fall up and up, the way kids are supposed to feel when they lie on their backs at night and look at the sky.

That had never happened to him in the city, but once, when he was very young, his parents had closed the store for a weekend and taken him on a trip to the Catskills. He'd slept the whole way, and when he woke up it was dark and they were at a motel and everybody was getting out of the car. The lights in the parking lot had been burned out and he'd looked up and suddenly felt sick and afraid, and had buried his face against his mother's breast until they were inside. The memory

embarrassed him, and he tried to make it go away.

Across the road, the untended rows of a vast field lay etched in gray and silver. Not more than a hundred yards away was the dark bulk of a house.

The grass in the yard hissed around his feet, and burrs pierced his socks. He thought of snakes again, but forged on. The steps of the porch creaked alarmingly. Under the porch roof, the door was a black rectangle, with air moving in stale currents from within. He smelled dust and mildew and rot. The house had to be deserted. Beyond it, the road snaked on, through more trees and past further fields. There was another dark shape that might have been a barn or another house, but no lights. Realizing that he was close to being out of earshot, and more afraid of what some trucker might say to him if the man found he'd left Monica alone than really worried about any danger to her, he decided to turn back.

He found her sitting on the hood, smoking a cigarette. The jack and the flat tire were both stored in the back of the car.

"You got the spare on okay?"

She nodded. "No problem. Unfortunately, the banks of the ditch are slick and steep, and I don't have the room to turn to make at them head on. You were right. Without a tow truck, we're stuck here."

He sat beside her, feeling oddly calm. So much for the idea that helping her record material would make for a nice restful vacation from typing his thesis. Still, maybe later they could look back on all this as an adventure.

He pointed up at the sky. "I'm not used to such bright stars. They look like diamonds on black velvet." She didn't respond to the image. "All right, so I'm a lousy poet." Thank God he'd never shown her any of the stuff he'd written back when he was an undergraduate and an English major.

"Find any houses?" she asked at length.

"One. It was deserted." He slid off the hood. "It can't be too bad a walk back up to that diner. I bet our waitress friend knows somebody with a tow truck.". She took one last puff and dropped her cigarette. "You're right. At least I'll be able to call Mom and Dad."

The embankment directly beside them was very steep and slick, but a few hundred feet back it was more gradual. No wanting to have to struggle up the rise and look foolish, he started walking along the ditch to the place where the climb would be easier. "Wait," she said from behind him. Before he could pause and look

back, he tripped over something and went sprawling.

"Steve, are you okay?"

Except for a skinned elbow, he was. Sitting up, he turned the penlight on the dark mass he'd tripped over.

"What is it?" asked Monica, catching up to him.

"Just a bundle of oily rags."

She stared at it. "No," she said at last. "No, it's not."

He looked again, seeing dark cloth and then the darker stains soaking through the tatters. In the middle of the scattered mass was a loop of something that glistened. The light picked out a tennis shoe and then a pale hand. There didn't seem to be any head.

Steve scrambled backward until he couldn't control his nausea, and then doubled over to vomit. Monica bent over him and gently held his shoulder. "We must have driven right past it without knowing it was in the ditch."

"It's a body," he said unnecessarily, not really hearing her.

She held him, although he didn't want her to. "I know."

"What could have done that?"

"A truck maybe -- hit and run." Her voice was as calm as a newscaster's. Usually, he envied her strength, but now it just made him feel weaker.

"But the head was gone." He immediately regretted saying that, irrationally fearing she might want to look for it or something.

"Dogs could have been at it," she continued clinically. "Even a bear."

He stiffened at the word. With a bear, you didn't need a hit and run to explain what had happened. He thought of the grunting black things that begged food by the trailer camps, slow and greedy and calm as big dogs. He thought of the reservation, where some loophole in federal law allowed the animals to be kept under even the most cramped conditions, and every service station and rest stop had its own LIVE BEAR sweltering away in a chain link cage with an asphalt floor. If one of those panting brutes ever got loose, it might well want to do something like this. He thought of watching Gentle Ben as a kid and how the big, whuffling bear, supposedly as friendly and loyal as Lassie, had terrified him, so

much so that he had begged his parents to change the channel.

Monica suddenly stood up. "Steve," she said softly, her hand firmly grasping his and pulling him upright, "let's start walking slowly the other way. Be calm and don't look back."

He walked and didn't look. "Why?"

"Something big crossed the road back there. Keep walking."

They passed the car. Why didn't they just get inside? He started to say something, then thought of being trapped in there while something large and hairy snuffled against the windshield. The pines loomed ahead.

They were in the resin-scented shadow when Monica let go of his hand. "Run," she said.

They bounded over the gravel, past the whispering, untended field. He meant to point out the bulk of the house, but, ten paces ahead of him, she'd already seen it. Her speed increased as she plunged into the tall grass. He panted, nearly tripping over something metallic, and strove to catch up. The porch stairs groaned under her pounding Nikes. Pausing, she leaned out of the darkness and urged him on.

Almost sure he heard something ploughing through the tangled weeds behind him, he stumbled on, his heart roaring. One of the rotted steps actually cracked under his feet, but he was off it and on the porch before it gave way. Monica was at his arm, first pulling him toward, and then pushing him into, the blackness.

The door to the house must have been open rather than missing as he'd first supposed, because there was a slamming sound behind him and then he couldn't see a thing. He switched on the penlight. It caught peeling wallpaper, holes in the floorboards, Monica's hand's fumbling beside the door frame. Finding a bar, she slid it home, then turned toward him.

He held the penlight on her face. "What was out there?"

She pushed the light away, taking him by the hand and turning off the beam. "Nothing." The darkness rushed in, heavy with mold and something else. What was she doing?

"Monica?"

"I'm not Monica," she said gently. "That was Monica in the ditch beside the road."

The hand holding his began to grow.

Narcopolis

by Wayne Alien Sallee

As I mentioned earlier with his story, "Rail Rider," Wayne Alien Sallee has published over 800 poems and stories. Here, then, is one of his poems. In addition to his having sold his first two books in 1989, the year was doubly exciting for Sallee, as he managed to be run over by a car. As Sallee puts it: "Update on my life: Hit by that all important '87 Dodge in March & for two months had a scarlet sponge for a brain and my left arm was a skin baggie of Kibbles 'N Bits. No scars from my many stays at Holy Cross Hospital, overlooking beautiful vermin-ridden Marquette Park, but still have recurring nightmares any time I see the Smothers Brothers's YO-YO MAN video." This, for those of you who ask writers: "Where do you get your ideas?"

I. CITY LIMITS

Nicotine grey town
of snot-ringed corridors
thriving behind a billion
jellied eyelids,
each chance visit
slivers our existence:
name your poison, or
the house special,
at the bar beneath
the elevated hell

II. THE ROAD FORKS AT SUICIDE

as an eager man
in a ridiculous tie
puts gun to teeth
and sleeps
while cameras voice

their soothing purr.
Drink deep but don't crowd,
big as you might be

III. WITNESS THE TOWN CLOWN

loved by all;
the retarded killer prances
misunderstanding the shrieks
of each night's degradations
before curling around
a dull corner

IV. PRETTY IN PINK

the grey is alive
with daddy sounds
guttural and snorting:
her mouth a scream --
ing window,
storm pains intact.
Whenever daddy sleeps fetal
(on the couch so plump)
after his little french death,
she dreams
the space shuttle explodes
in creamy white smiles

V. INNER CITY FANTASIES

: for that is all we do
in Narcopolis, for

the bloated present
is too much. The past
denied, the future defiled.
Narcopolis AKA Prescription
City AKA Smallville ad nauseum,
the one true inner city
where pregnant leeches dangle
from the rusted streetlamps
of what little memory remains

VI. WALLS OF DAY

coexist with those
of night, L.A.
freeways intersect
an Arkham dirtroad,
a dead king performs
endless benedictions
of medley in a sea
eternally October
(C C Rider)
(C C Rider)
(I said) is it a dream
when chitinous
souls shove
communion
wafers
into vacant windows,
ghastly parking lots,
to insure that
the virgin straddles truth?|
Or is this, too,
a wanting release,
a discharge of reason,
as opposed to sailing
off to Key Largo
between blinks,

with a full deck brimming
of anal-retentive harlequins

VII. TOURIST TRAP

Come. Run on a cool
ribbon of intestine.
You know the score
or you wouldn't be asking.

VIII. LEGEND IN NEON

endlessly October... but
for a breezeway seventeen
molecules long: a favorite
spot of Mary Kelly,
and Jack the Ripper's
last known victim laps
at gutter surf
the texture of Kennedy's
blood. The causeway
is refuge for the clinically
sane, its sole light
a Cerveza Fria sign
dangling hypnotically
from a pile of eye
sockets, a legend in neon.
The prima donna of Spitalfields
hails claim to each brittle
handhold in the dirt,
and each glance
of her smiling eyelids
reminds us of those in 'Nam
or Iran, a field near Countryside,
or basement abattoir in Ogden, Utah.

Those who knew that the worst
of their lives, wafer-
thin yet lingering,
was all that kept them
from this ghastly, cramped
town that Kelly calls home.
The guns are cocked
clothes removed
hydrochloric acid poured.
Ready. Steady. Go.

IX. BOY THE WAY GLENN MILLER PLAYED

Forget the demographics
of suicides and addicts;
anyone's allowed in, and rent
is cheap as your own future:
the lambent american scream.
At 2 am, the fear is gone,
and the background dirges
are sung by Mary and Rhoda and Archie
and Bob, rerun refugees
from SitCom City (Boy the way
Glenn Miller played...) and the streets,
the streets washed blue, sometimes
blue mixed with pale, and a gentle
wind moans take me now.
Release yourself to the void,
let it suck your pleasure dry.
Think of where those years have gone:
syndicated sitcoms now a generation
old. You can check out of this town
any time you like, but time
is not what you think.

X. YOUR HOME TOWN

And where do these poetic roads
lead, if not to Hell, Perdition,
or Misterogers Neighborhood?
What point need be made? Walk
down your own street in zombie dusk
and rubberneck the vacant eyes
of your neighbors at their blue,
sometimes blue and pale. TV screens,
man! Tsktsking the news of life
while lapping up lifestyles of the rich
and fantastical. Narcopolis is a way
station for the damned, guarded
by bored men bronzed by arthritic
balm, and haloed by bullet holes.

XI. THE FUGITIVE

his kind cruel hand:
but himself the noblest
of citizens, though shy
of face and gaunt of leg,
a 60's videodrome (boy
the way I said C C Rid --)
searching in gutter patois,
running out of love
for pooling metaphors
vagrant fragrances
and a facial tick that
won't stay gone;
his whole benign being
contrafllicts what
he's trying to deny
to die
perchance to dream
and the episode never truly ends...

Nights In The City

by Jessica Amanda Salmonson

Born in January of 1950, Jessica Amanda Salmonson presently works and lives out of a bookshop in Seattle, Washington. She remains very active in the small press scene, despite showing an increasing presence in the major leagues. Her latest books include two collections of her short stories, A Silver Thread of Madness and John Collier and Fredric Brown Went Quarrelling Through My Head, and two anthologies, Tales by Moonlight II and What Did Miss Darrington See?. Somehow she finds time to continue to edit the small press magazines, Fantasy Macabre and Fantasy & Terror. Salmonson is a genius when it comes to unearthing obscure works by forgotten writers of fantasy and horror, particularly those by little-known women writers.

Forthcoming books include a novel from Mark Ziesing Books, anthologies of neglected women writers from Scream/Press, and The Encyclopedia of Amazons. "Nights in the City" is one of several stories original to A Silver Thread of Madness. Salmonson calls it: "a ghost story I'm exceedingly proud of, but it is not properly horror, though embodying something of a mini-essay about the meaning of horror." As I've said before, not all horrors are drenched in gore.

What a shame that in this world there is so much suffering. Today in the street I saw an elderly man standing alone, miserable and lost, having soiled his pants so that pedestrians made sour faces and veered away from his odor. He wanted to know where there was a certain street, but no one would answer him. He had gotten off the bus because the driver told him the street was nearby, but he couldn't find it. So, holding my breath, I walked up to this very old and ugly man and said, "You cannot get to that street from here. You are in the entirely wrong part of the city." And he began to wail, "But I haven't a bus transfer and it was my last change! The driver didn't give me a transfer! Why did he tell me my street was this one?" What should I tell him? That the driver probably didn't want a man who had soiled his pants to ride the bus and had neglected to give him a transfer in case he tried once more to get on the bus and find his proper way? I left the old man so that I could take a couple deep breaths, then I walked back to him and told him not to shout and weep, that if he would walk down to the bottom of the hill, which was a long way, he would see a bridge across the freeway, and across that, some distance further, he would find the road that would connect him with the street he sought, or at least one end of it. The last I saw of him, he was going down the hill as I directed. Several minutes later, as I continued toward errands of my own, I

suddenly realized I had told him a wrong turn, and he would end up under the freeway viaduct, even more hopelessly lost than before.

So you see it is a sad world. And as this is the truth of things, how can I be expected to sit down and write stories for the magazines and anthologies that are so much hot air meant to entertain? How can I write you a spooky ghost story that you will enjoy a great deal because secretly you do not believe in ghosts and the terror isn't real to you. Someday you will be standing on a street corner, old and pitiful, having shit your pants, and a middle-aged woman with a sincere face will give you bad directions. That, my friend, is real terror. But you would rather hear about a weird visitation -- a ghost or a vampire -- something like that. Very well, but no more of these trumped up horror stories that could never be. This is about an actual spirit, an absolutely true story that I have never told anybody until now because I knew they wouldn't believe me. It happened to me quite a while ago, when I was a pretty girl. All kinds of men were attracted to me in those days, even a dead one. I thought I would never be rid of him. Don't laugh, or you will shit your pants! Then who will want to sit by you on the bus?

The bus is in a lot of my stories because I live in the city and don't drive a car. I write about what I know. That is also why I so often write about pain and about ghosts. I know about ghosts. If I had a dollar for every bus I've been on and five dollars for every ghost I've seen, I could break even riding the bus. One day on the bus, when I was young and good-looking, a very pale fellow got on without paying. I saw him not pay the driver, but the driver didn't say a thing. I should have known at that moment that the pale man was a ghost, but in those days, I didn't believe in them. Whether someone believes in ghosts or not, they are everywhere. Everybody sees them all the time. But if you don't believe in them, you think they are something else, living people perhaps, or crazy ones, or dogs hunched back in the shadows of the alleys. But they're ghosts.

I have a lot of tricks to keep people from sitting beside me on the bus. The simplest is to slouch all over the place and pretend not to notice anybody. A more subtle method is to give the general impression that I'm getting off at the next stop. No one likes to sit beside someone, only to have to get up and let them out of the seat right away. Another excellent method is to look very intensely out the window on the opposite side of the bus. A new rider will not want to sit down and get in your line of vision. Usually I do things like that, but as this fellow had not paid his bus fare, I looked at him as if to say, "Hey, I had to pay for this ride, so you better do it too!" But the eye contact was a bad idea. He completely misunderstood what I was thinking. He smiled at me and I knew he intended to sit beside me. Another girl might have liked the idea, because he looked pretty clean, and his smile was

innocent. But I thought he looked like Aubrey Beardsley and who wants to sit with some sick, skinny young fellow who parts his hair down the middle? What a clown he was! And now he was sitting beside me, a bit too close, and saying, "I only just got here."

I didn't say a thing to him at first. I ignored him. What was I supposed to say to such a line as that? Oh, that's nice, I'm very glad you just got here. Or, should I have asked him where "here" is and how was he so sure he had made it even now?

"In Seattle, I mean," he added. "Until a few minutes ago, I was in Dallas."

He had a Texas accent. It added to his general air of being a clown.

"Have you ever been to Dallas?" he asked.

"Once, I was," I admitted, not looking at him.

"It was always ugly," he said. "Now it's worse. A lot of office towers, and downtown it's boring and there are no good places to eat, if you're a vegetarian like myself."

As a matter of fact I was a vegetarian like himself. So, despite my defenses, which were big walls from here to the moon, he had somehow managed to climb over. I turned my head to give this skeletal clown of a Texan a long look, and he showed me those big teeth again. Big eyes, too. He wasn't bad looking if you like skeletons. I had to turn away so he wouldn't see my silent laugh.

"I never wanted to live in Dallas but I didn't have a choice: I was born there. Poverty killed my mother. In Texas you either have a lot or you don't have anything. Seattle is much nicer. Even if you don't have anything, you have a lot."

That was true. There was the water, the mountains, the parks, the stores, the trees, and you could walk to everything -- or catch the bus.

"I thought it was the end for me," he said. "I always wanted to see Seattle, or else Paris, but my mother was born in Seattle and talked about it a lot. I always thought Seattle was on a map next to Paradise."

That's when I was little. I thought Paradise could be found on a map, you see. Seattle would be close by. I always thought that if someone dies and goes to heaven, it wouldn't be far out of the way to go to Seattle first."

At this point I could not help but laugh out loud, and it was no use trying to hide it. I was going to look him straight in the face to do my laughing. Only I didn't

laugh. When I turned my head, there was no one sitting beside me. I looked down the aisle and up. The bus was approaching my own stop, so I had to get off. "How did he do that?" I wondered. I guessed he must have been hiding.

"Hey! Hey! You never told me your name!" he shouted several days later. He came running down the sidewalk in my direction. His gait was awkward. He ran on his toes and leaned too far forward. His comically parted hair was sticking up in back. His big teeth smiled. His big eyes smiled. I was afraid he was going to smash right into me. "Let me take your groceries!" he said, out of breath, but I wouldn't let him take them. "You'd drop them," I said. He was so skinny I doubted he could carry anything heavier than a balloon without falling down with it. I said, "I thought only girls were anorexic."

"Boys sometimes," he said. "But I'm not. I'm just skinny."

He walked along beside me. I wasn't sure what to do. I had no particular reason to trust him. He was a stranger to me. But if he kept following me, he'd see where I lived. If I went somewhere else besides home, I'd have to carry the groceries everywhere and the milk would get warm.

"Want a picnic?" he asked.

"No."

"When was your last picnic?"

"I don't go on picnics."

"Why not?" he asked. "It's such a nice city! Lots of places to have a picnic! Isn't life a picnic? Gee, Seattle is swell!"

He was definitely an exasperating clown. "You should be glad you live here," he said. "I am glad," I replied curtly. "You didn't tell me your name." I told him my name. "That's a nice name." "Thank you. I picked it myself." "My name is Henry." "Terrible," I said. "I know. I didn't choose it." "Change it," I said. "To what?" "Sam," I said.

"Okay, my name is Sam. Oh! Must be going. See you soon!" And when I looked around, he was gone.

You may be thinking this is an amusing story, but it isn't. Sam was a very

unhappy fellow despite that he kept smiling. It made him miserable that I was smart-mouthed with him and not interested in his uninvited attention. He was in Seattle on his first trip to anywhere in the world, and on his best behavior as travelers always are, and he was hoping for a wonderful adventure, a nice romance. But I was the only girl he had met so far and I had a smart mouth. I wouldn't even go on a picnic with him. If that's not sad, then you don't know what sadness is. Sam was very sad.

As for me, I wasn't sad in those days. That came later. Or before, I forget which. In those days I was having an affair with a shot-putter, a big young woman with a mean arm who could bench-press I forget how much, a million pounds. She was Olympics material and was supposed to go to Russia for some trials but fell in love with a country-western singer named Tasha and gave up her chances to be recognized as a world-class athlete so she could be a go-fer for Tasha's band. Made a complete fool of herself. But it wasn't giving up much, I guess. Shot-putters don't get to be on boxes of Wheaties or pose with fancy cars. Neither do athletes who won't or can't hide the fact that they're dykes. Obviously everything I'm telling you has to be the truth, you surely realize, since even in a ghost story, nobody could make such things up. So, as I was saying, this was after her thing with Tasha, and I was very happy with this big-muscled girl. It didn't last a long time, but it was a nice affair and I was still in the middle of that when Sam tried to get to know me. If I had been on the rebound maybe I would have responded. Who can be sure? As it was, I didn't need any scarecrow of a Texan for a boyfriend. Forget him, I thought.

"Hi," I said, when I saw him sitting on the outdoor deck of a cafe I often patronize.

"Hi!" he shouted in surprise. I was standing right in front of him.

"You were somewhere else," I said.

"Me? No. I've been in Seattle the whole time."

"I mean you were daydreaming."

"How do you know?"

I laughed. It was hard to make sense out of that boy.

"I don't know if I was daydreaming or not," he said. "I was sitting over there on west Queen Anne Hill waiting for the sunset a couple of minutes ago,

wondering where you might be. Suddenly, here I was."

Queen Anne was pretty far away from Capitol Hill. I supposed he exaggerated how fast he covered the distance.

"I was going to have their quiche," I said. "Care to join me?"

"What's a quiche?"

I laughed again. He was a Texan after all. "Cheese and egg pie with broccoli -- at this place anyway. It used to be the 'in' food. This is the only place that still makes any. You eat cheese and eggs, don't you?"

"I used to. I don't eat anything now."

"The ultimate Gandhiist," I said. "Well, I'm going to eat."

He came in with me but didn't order anything, wasn't even acknowledged by the woman behind the counter. He sat across the table from me.

"You should order something," I said. "You're too thin. You must be anemic. I thought all Texans had tans."

"Not me," he said.

"I can see that."

"I mean not me, I'm not anemic."

"Do you take vitamins?"

"Use to. Lots. Want to see a French film with me? I like French films. Can't see them in Dallas."

"Okay. I'll see a French film with you. Dutch?"

"I can pay."

"Wow, a real date," I said. "I thought you were poor."

"I got here with about twenty dollars in small bills in my pockets. No matter how many times I spend them, they're still there. I think they must disappear from the cash drawers and get back in my pockets. I guess it isn't honest, huh?"

"Pretty handy pockets if you ask me," I said.

"It looks as though I can spend the money forever and ever if I wanted."

"If you get new pants," I said, "save me your old pockets."

I ate my dinner and we went to see a French comedy. It was about two girls and a guy. Why was it always two girls and a guy? Why not just two girls? Why not two guys? Why not two guys and a girl? The French are like that. I ate popcorn in the dark and offered some to Sam but he never took any. He held my hand for a while, a delicate touch. Then there was a really funny scene. The guy in the comedy had been locked in the bathroom and the girls were in bed together. The guy was yelling, according to the subtitles, "What are you doing out there? Why is the door stuck?" I was laughing really hard at that part. I was the only one. After the film was over, I turned to ask Sam if he liked the part about the bathroom, but he was gone. "Probably went to the bathroom," I said to myself. I waited by the exit a long time, then said, "Stupid Texan," and went to see my shot-put girl.

The two things you can't find when you need them are police officers and bathrooms. This is why so many old people shit their pants in public. They get so frightened of the muggers and purse-snatchers and street punks, they just shit their pants. If there were more police officers around, things wouldn't smell so bad. I'm not sure what the connection is exactly, but bathrooms and police officers are part of the conspiracy of misery. Something to do with the way the universe works. I'm still thinking about that old guy I gave bad directions to. He is probably under the viaduct at this very moment, while I tell you this story of my youthful follies. I was also thinking of the scene in the French movie. I remember almost nothing about that movie, not the title or anything, but I remember that bathroom. Funny the things you'll remember years later.

Sam appeared in my apartment before evening.

"Shit, fuck, Sam! What are you doing in my place! How did you get in!"

I cussed a bunch more. I was beside myself. I was instantly and extremely very, very mad. Sam looked hurt that I wasn't glad to see him. But I value my privacy. I don't tell many people where I live. I don't go see many people, either. Even my best friends, I expect them to knock on the door first. But some skinny turd from Texas who took me to a movie once thinks he can barge right in. Boy, was I mad. By the time I could see straight, Sam wasn't there. I hadn't heard him leave. The doors were still bolted from the inside. Had I imagined him? Was I even crazier than I knew about?

Several days later he appeared in my apartment again. It must have been two

or three in the morning. I rolled over on the futon and there he was, standing beside my quilts, a gawky shadow. "You asshole," I groaned sleepily, feeling helpless because I slept naked. "What do you think you're doing?"

"I'm a virgin," he said.

"Get the hell out of here."

"How can a boy just die and be happy if he's a virgin?"

"If you don't get out you'll find out because I'll kill you."

"Somebody already did."

I wasn't hearing straight. I was really tired. But Sam was weeping. I fumbled for my bed lamp but its twenty-five watts didn't light the bedroom much. In the dimness, I saw that Sam was paler and skinnier than ever, like something was wasting him away. He rubbed his eyes with long, thin fingers and tried to brace up. He tried to put on a manly show. But he was just a stupid skinny kid. "I always wanted to come to Seattle," he said.

"Well you made it," I growled, sitting up and pulling a cover all around me. I said, "I didn't know you were a cracked nut, Sam. You can't break into people's places like this."

"I didn't break anything."

"What would they do in Texas if you did this?"

"Shoot me, I guess. I never liked Texas."

"Seattle's mellow, Sam, but it's not that mellow. If I had a gun, I'd shoot you too."

"But if you were a Texan, you'd have the gun. Three or four."

"Why have you come at this ungodly hour?"

"To say good-bye." His expression was so sad. His eyes were like a big puppy's.

"Going back to Dallas?"

"God! I hope not. I don't know where I'm going. But I'm going somewhere, I can tell. I keep feeling it pull at me."

"I know the feeling," I said.

"But I didn't want to go and still be a virgin."

"Look," I said. "In this life you get to visit Seattle once, or you get to be laid. You can't have them both."

That made him smile. Big teeth smiling.

"Pretty subtle fucker, aren't you? Look, would you believe me if I said I was a dyke?"

"Yes."

"You would? Why, do I look like a goddamned dyke?"

"No."

"Good. Well, I am."

"I thought so."

"You did?" I didn't know how to take this guy. "Then why the hell have you been following me all over the city? You got a thing about lesbians or something?"

"Yes."

There was something so painfully, asininely innocent about his reply that I couldn't even be annoyed. I had to admit I was attracted to the clown. I had Beardsley drawings on my walls, and a couple different books about his life, what there was of it. Suppose that that pathetic boy came to you in the middle of the night and said, "Look, I'm dying of consumption, I won't live long, but I took a good bath, and I'm going to die a virgin unless you help me out."

I threw back the covers. "Hop in."

He stood there gaping.

"Come on, hop in."

He fell onto the quilts like a snapped twig. "Really?" he said.

"What are friends for?" I helped him undress. "Do you know anything about this sort of thing?"

"Sure. Lots of pictures."

He started nosing around my body.

He was clumsy but his touch was light, pleasant. He was skinny as a girl but sharper-edged. Was he any good? Not really. But I kept thinking his name wasn't Sam or Henry, but Aubrey. I rather liked it. To tell the truth, that bench-pressing shot-putting girlfriend of mine wasn't any worse or better. So I couldn't complain. And he was having a good time. Afterward, he chattered on and on like I was the only friend he'd ever had in his whole miserable, boring life. He trusted me. He loved me. He poured out his soul.

In the morning he was gone, the bolts to the doors still locked from the inside.

I would've looked him up in the Dallas directory but he never told me his last name. But I guess I sort of knew all along he was dead anyway. And I'll always remember the last thing I heard him say before I nodded off to sleep that night, with him in my arms. The poor sweet boy, smiling at me in the dark, whispering, "I always knew Seattle was next to paradise."

Return To The Mutant Rain Forest

by Bruce Boston and Robert Frasier

Bruce Boston's fiction and poetry have appeared in Amazing Stories, Weird Tales, Twilight Zone Magazine, Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, and in various anthologies. Most recent among his ten collections is a book of dark fantasy poems, Faces of the Beast. He lives in Berkeley, California, where he works as a technical writer and book designer.

Born in Ayer, Massachusetts in 1951, Robert Frasier has had poetry and fiction published in Amazing Stories, Weird Tales, Twilight Zone Magazine, Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, and in various other magazines and anthologies. Most recent among his three collections is a book of science fiction poems, Co-Orbital Moons. He lives in Nantucket, Massachusetts.

Opposite coasts, but otherwise these two guys seem to be following in each other's footprints -- so a collaboration isn't all that unexpected. What is strange is that they're doing so in a shared poetry world, The Mutant Rain Forest. A collection of their best such excursions has just been published by Mark Ziesing Books: Chronicles of the Mutant Rain Forest. We may all be safer with the Greenhouse Effect.

Years later we come back to find the fauna and flora more alien than ever, the landscape unrecognizable, the course of rivers altered, small opalescent lakes springing up where before there was only underbrush, as if the land itself has somehow changed to keep pace with the metaprotean life forms which now inhabit it.

Here magnetism proves as variable as other phenomena. Our compass needle shifts constantly and at random, and we must fix direction by the stars and sun alone. Above our heads the canopy writhes in undiscovered life: tiny albino lemurs flit silently from branch to branch, tenuous as arboreal ghosts in the leaf purple shadow. Here time seems as meaningless as our abstracted data.

The days stretch before us in soft bands of verdigris, in hours marked by slanting white shafts of illumination. At our feet we watch warily for the trip-vines of arrowroot, while beetles and multipedes of every possible perversion boil about

us, reclaiming their dead with voracious zeal.

By the light of irradiated biota the night proliferates: a roving carpet of scavenger fungi seeks out each kill to drape and consume the carcass in an iridescent shroud. A carnivorous mushroom spore roots on my exposed forearm and Tomaz must dig deeply beneath the flesh to excise the wrinkled neon growth, which has sprouted in minutes.

We have returned to the mutant rain forest to trace rumors spread by the natives who fish the white water, to embark on a reconnaissance into adaptation and myth. Where are the toucans, Genna wonders, once we explain the cries, which fill the darkness as those of panthers, mating in heat, nearly articulate in their complexity.

Tomaz chews stale tortillas, pounds roots for breakfast, and relates a tale of the Parakana who ruled this land.

One morning the Chiefs wife, aglow, bronzed and naked in the eddies of a rocky pool, succumbed to an attack both brutal and sublime, which left her body inscribed with scars confirming the bestial origins of her lover.

At term, the massive woman was said to have borne a child covered with the finest gossamer caul of ebon-blue hair.

The fiery vertical slits of its eyes enraged the Chief. After he murdered the boy, a great cat screamed for weeks and stalked about their tribal home, driving them north. His story over, Tomaz leads our way into the damp jungle.

From base camp south we hack one trail after another until we encounter impenetrable walls of a sinewy fiber, lianas as thick and indestructible as titanium cables, twining back on themselves in a solid Gordian sheath, feeding on their own past growth; while farther south, slender silver trees rise like pylons into the clouds.

From our campo each day we hack useless trail after trail, until we come

upon the pathways that others have forged and maintained, sinuous and waist-high, winding inward to still farther corrupt recesses of genetic abandon: here we discover a transfigured ceiba, its rugged bark incised with the fresh runes of a primitive ideography.

Genna calls a halt to our passage to load her Minicam. She circles about the tree, shrugging off our protests. As we feared, her careless movement triggers a tripvine, but instead of a hail of deadly spines we are bombarded by balled leaves exploding into dust -- marking us with luminous ejecta and a third eye on Genna's forehead.

Souza dies that night, limbs locked in rigid fibro-genesis. A panther cries; Tomaz wants us to regroup at our camp.

Genna decides she has been chosen, scarified for passage. She notches her own trail to some paradise born of dream hallucination, but stumbles back, wounded and half-mad, the Minicam lost, a cassette gripped in whitened knuckles.

From base camp north we flail at the miraculous regrowth which walls off our retreat to the airstrip by the river. The ghost lemurs now spin about our heads, they mock us with a chorus as feverish and compulsive as our thoughts.

We move relentlessly forward, as one, the final scenes of Genna's tape flickering over and over in our brains.

In the depths of the mutant rain forest where the water falls each afternoon in a light filtered to vermillion, a feline stone idol stands against the opaque foliage. On the screen of the monitor it rises up from nowhere, upon its hind legs, both taller and thicker than a man. See how the cellular accretion has distended its skull, how the naturally sleek architecture of the countenance has evolved into a distorted and angular grotesquerie, how the taloned forepaws now possess opposable digits.

In the humid caves and tunnels carved from living vines, where leprous anacondas coil, a virulent faith calls us. A sudden species fashions godhood in its own apotheosis.

The End Of The Hunt

by David Drake

Born in Dubuque, Iowa on September 24, 1945, David Drake graduated from Duke University School of Law and settled down in Chapel Hill, North Carolina with a job as assistant town attorney. For many years Drake had been trying to write horror fiction -- his first sale was in 1966 to August Derleth for an Arkham House anthology -- but was frustrated because law school, a tour of duty in Vietnam, and now his job left him with little time for more than the occasional short story. Quitting his job, he signed on as a part-time bus driver in 1980, and by the following year he was able to become a full-time writer. Since then he has written, collaborated on, and edited dozens of novels, collections, shared-world books, and anthologies. He is best known for his Hammer's Stammers series of space-mercenary novels and stories, although he is also at home in heroic fantasy and horror fiction. His latest books include Surface Action, Northworld, and Rolling Hot.

"The End of the Hunt" is one of that group of stories Drake was writing during the early 1970s and submitting, usually without success, to the few markets of the time. Most if not all of these stories, some of them revised, eventually were published. This one fell through the cracks until Drake recently found the manuscript and sold it to New Destinies. Highly praising this 17-year-old story, an English reviewer further observed: "David Drake's 'The End of the Hunt' is the first really mature story I've seen from him."

Corll's eyes caught the betraying dust trail of a pebble skipping down the canyon wall ahead of him. Realizing what it meant, he flattened in mid-stride, his feet and hands braced to fling him in any direction of safety. "Shedde," he demanded, "how do we get out of here?"

"Think," replied the other. "You're admirably fitted for it."

"Shedde," Corll snarled, "there's no time for joking! They must have reached the canyon mouth behind us by now -- and they're ahead of us on the rim as well!"

Corll had underestimated the ants again. His self-surety had led him to scout the territory the insects claimed with their many-spined mounds. He had not known that they would go beyond it in the savage tenacity of their pursuit. The comparison of his long strides with their tiny scrambling had left him scornful even then. But Corll needed rest, needed sleep, needed to hunt for water when the supply he carried grew low in these sun-blasted badlands; and those who pursued

him seemed to recognize no such necessities.

"Run for the far end of the canyon," directed Shedde.

"Won't they have it blocked by now?" Corll asked, but he sprang into motion without awaiting the answer. He had feared this sort of trap ever since he learned that the ants had ways of moving beneath the surface more swiftly than they could above it. He now had proof that their intrusions in the subsoil must penetrate far beyond their range above ground.

Once already they had ringed Corll. He had thought it was finished with him then.

"They won't have to block the end," Shedde was saying. "This is a box canyon. Yes, I remember this canyon... though it's been a long time. A terribly long time."

"Shedde!" Corll hissed, his brain seething with rage, "you will die with me, don't you understand? There is no time now for jokes!"

A ponderous cornice sheared from the right wall of the canyon. Corll spent a millisecond judging the trajectory of the orange-red mass, and then leaped to the right, his equipment belt clanking on the wall as his fingers scrabbled and found cracks to burrow into.

"Mutated vermin," Shedde murmured in revulsion.

The ledge of rock touched an out-thrust knob twenty feet above Corll; inertia exploded the missile outward. The knob shattered with it and slashed Corll as a sleet of dust and gravel. That he ignored, waiting only for the tremble of the last murderous, head-sized fragments striking the ground before he darted off again.

"Shedde," he asked, "can we turn around and break through the canyon mouth?" Through the crawling horde that would choke the ground. Through the things that shambled instead of crawling, the giants that would have justified Corll's journey if they had left him an opportunity to warn the others of his race. It seemed quite certain now that the giants would be the ultimate cause of his failure. Only two bombs still hung from his equipment belt, and their poison had already proven ineffective against the things whose size belied their antlike appearance.

"Keep running," Shedde directed. "They must be blocking the passage behind us for almost a mile by now."

"But -- " Corll began. Fluttering jewel-flickers in the light of the great sun

cut him off. There was no choice now. He lengthened his stride, freeing one of the heavy globes in either hand. Pain knifed his thigh. He ignored it, loped on. For the moment the pain was only pain, and had no margin to waste on comfort.

A ruby-carapaced ant sailed past Corll's face, twisting violently as though sheer determination would bring its mandibles the remaining inch they needed to close on Corll's flesh. The insect was scarcely an inch long itself, half mandible and entirely an engine of destruction. The warriors were light enough to drop safely from any height, ready to slash and to tear when they landed. They were pouring off the rim in a deadly shower that carpeted the canyon floor too thickly, now, for the runner to avoid. Agony tore Corll's pads and ankles a dozen times. More frightening were the ghost-light twitchings that mounted his calves. He had waited as long as he could.

Corll's right hand smashed a globular bomb against the massively functional buckle of his crossbelt. The bomb shattered, spraying the acrid reek of its vegetable distillate about him in a blue mist. The poison cooled his body where it clung to him, but its clammy, muscle-tightening chill was infinitely preferable to the fiery horror of the warriors' jaws. No matter -- he could feel the mandibles relax, see the wave of ants on the ground wither and blacken as the dense cloud oozed over them. Corll held his own breath as he ran through the sudden carnage. He knew that the fluid coating his lower limbs would protect him for a time, and he prayed that the time would be adequate.

"Not much further," Shedde remarked.

Dead ants scrunched underfoot. Jaws seared Corll briefly, then dropped away. His eyes scanned the rim of the canyon as it doglegged, noting that the rain of warriors had paused for the moment.

A long rock hurtled down, pitched with more force than gravity could have given it. Corll's leap took him a dozen feet up the cliff wall where his legs shot him off at a flat angle, a safe angle.... Stone smashed on stone beside him. A feeler waved vexedly from the high rim.

The ants had very nearly caught him three days before while he dozed in the shadow of a wind-sculpted cliff, certain that his smooth pacing had left the insects far behind. Through half-closed eyelids Corll had suddenly seen that tiny, blood-bright droplets that trickled toward his shelter were now picking out the ruddy sunlight on ruddy stone. The first bomb had not freed him then, nor had the third. When he had darted over the nearest rise with the poison and its bitter stench lapping about him like a shroud, Corll had seen the horizon in all directions

sanguine with deadly life. The ants had waited until a cold intelligence somewhere had assessed their success as certain. But that time Corll had leaped through them as a lethal ghost, wrapped in his poison and guided by Shedde's calculated guess as the narrowest link in a chain of unobservable thickness.

If the insects or the brain that controlled them had reconsidered the capacities of their quarry, which had not caused them to slacken their pursuit.

"Their numbers aren't infinite," Shedde explained, "and they can't have laced the whole continent with their tunnels -- yet. Many of them are following us, yes. But it's the ones sent on ahead that are dangerous, and with every mile we run, the more of those we're safe from. There will be some waiting for us at the end of the canyon. If we could have bypassed them, perhaps we would have escaped entirely."

Corll was stung with wordless anger at his companion's objectivity; then he rounded the canyon's bend to see the cliffs linked sharply a hundred yards in front of him. The concrete of the blockhouse that squatted at the base of the cliffs would have been magenta in the light of the waning sun, save for the warriors that clung to it like a layer of blazing fungus.

Corll halted.

"There's a door," Shedde prompted.

"I can't get through those ants on the residue of the bomb," Corll said. The whisper-whisper of feet a million times magnified echoed in his mind if not his ears.

"Use the last bomb, then. There's no choice."

Nor was there. Baying a defiant challenge, Corll charged for the structure. A stride before he reached the waiting mass, he smashed his last defense into vitreous splinters on his breast. Do the ants feel pain? He wondered, the warriors only a dying blur at the edges of his mind. Then, expecting it to slam open, he hit the portal in a bound -- and recoiled from it. The metal door fit its jambs without a seam, refuge if open but otherwise a cruel jest.

"To the right," Shedde directed. "There should be a pressure plate."

The tapestry of ants, linked even in death, still hung in swathes across the blockhouse. Corll's hands groped through the insects desperately, feeling the desiccated bodies crumble as easily as the ashes of an ancient fire. The door swung open on a lighted room.

Corll sprang inside. "The inner plate is also a lock," his companion said. "Touch to open, touch to close. But only the touch of your kind." Corll slammed the door and palmed the device.

They were in a narrow anteroom, softly lighted by a strip in the ceiling. At the back was another metal door, half closed. The only furnishings of the anteroom were a pair of objects fixed to the wall to either side of the rear door. In general shape they resembled sockets for flambeaux, but they were thrust out horizontally rather than vertically. Corll's quick eyes flicked over them, but he did not move closer.

"Now what?" he asked.

"Now we wait, of course," replied Shedde. "If the systems are still working, there should be water inside." There was a pause before he concluded acidly, "And Hargen built to last."

Corll eased open the door. The inner room was much larger, but it was almost filled with dull, black machinery. Against the far wall stood the framework of a chair in a clear semi-circle. It was backed against another door, this one open onto darkness. On the floor before the chair sprawled a skeleton.

The outer door of the blockhouse clanged as something heavy struck it.

"Who is Hargen?" Corll demanded. Half-consciously he backed against the inner door of the anteroom, shutting it against the gong-notes echoing through the building. His breath still came in short, quick sobs. "Shedde, what is this place?"

"Hargen," Shedde repeated with a whisper of hatred. "Hargen was a genetic engineer. As a technician, as a craftsman, he may have had no equal... though perhaps the men who built his instruments, they were brilliant in their own right. But tools of metal weren't enough for Hargen -- he had his dream, he said, for the new Mankind."

Corll eyed the room. He was uneasy because he had never before known such vicious intensity in his companion. A pencil of water spurted from one corner of the ceiling down into a metal basin from which it then drained. Corll tested a drop of the fluid with his tongue before drinking deeply.

"He had to change us, Corll," continued Shedde. "Cut into genes, weld them, treat the unformed flesh as a sculptor does stone. 'Your children will live forever!' he said. 'Your children will live forever!'"

"Have we lived forever, Corll?"

The echoes that flooded the building changed note, warning Corll that the outer door was sagging. He quickly squeezed empty the long waterbag of intestine looped across his shoulders, and then refilled it from the falling stream.

"Where does the other door lead, Shedde?"

"A tunnel. Try it."

Pretending to ignore the undertone of his companion's voice, Corll attempted to leap the chair. Something caught him in mid-air and flung him back into the room.

"You see?" Shedde giggled. "Hargen wasn't just a genius, he had a sense of humor. He could sit there and control every machine in the building -- and no man could touch him without his permission. Do you want to leave that way, Corll?"

"If they can batter down the outer door, they can get through this one," Corll noted with the tense desperation of a fighter at bay. The sound of metal ripping underscored his words. "Shedde, what do we do?"

Suddenly calmer, Shedde replied, "The weapons should have manual controls. There, beside the door."

Staring at the pair of hand-sized plates flanking the anteroom door, Corll realized what unfamiliarity had hidden from him: both plates displayed shrunken perspectives of the anteroom itself and the wreckage of the outer door. Joystick controls were set beneath the plates. When Corll twitched one of the rods, it moved the black dot he had thought was a flaw in the screen.

"If you push the top of the control rod," Shedde said, "It fires."

The outer door of the blockhouse squealed again as it was rent completely away. A pair of giants that seemed ants in all but size stood framed in the doorway, their forelegs bowed a little to allow them to peer inside. Uncertain of what he was doing, Corll squeezed his thumb down on the stick.

The dazzling spatter of light blasted powder from the concrete, vapor from the outer doorjamb. Corll's reflex slashed the fierce beam sideways across one of the giants. The creature separated along the line of contact.

The light blinked off when Corll raised the thumb-switch. The remaining giant was scrambling backwards. Corll flicked the control. The dot moved in the direction opposite to his expectations. He moved it the other way and squeezed, chuckling in wonder as the glare sawed lethally across the second monster as well.

"They're hollow," he exclaimed as he squinted at the jerking bodies.

"I wonder how they fuel them?" Shedde mused. "The exoskeleton would give adequate area for muscle attachment without the mass of digestive organs to contend with. Even the vermin seem to have their genetic geniuses."

"How long will this weapon burn?" Corll asked, caution tempering his elation.

"Perhaps forever," the other replied. "Near enough that neither of us needs be concerned. Hargen never took half measures.

"I stood here before," Shedde continued, "to plead with him. I had been one of the first, you see. 'You don't know what you're doing,' I told him. 'You call it freedom from the tyranny of the body, a chance for the children of the race to have the immortality that was only vicarious before. But it's the death of those you change! We don't breed, we won't breed -- it's not worth personal immortality to me to know that I'll never have a son.' And Hargen laughed at me, and he said, 'I have stayed here in this fortress for seventy-four years without leaving, so you think that I am ignorant. You can breed, little man; if the will is lacking, my knives didn't cut it out of you.'

"I shouted at him then; but before his servants pushed me out, Hargen stood and stretched his long bones, those bones that lie there in the dust, and he said, 'Come back in twenty thousand, come back in two hundred thousand years if it takes that long -- come back and tell my bones then that I did not know.' " Shedde paused for so long that Corll thought he was done speaking, but at last he continued, "Well, you were right, Hargen. If we failed to breed, then so did the men you didn't change -- and yes, you knew it. Just as you knew what would come of the race you formed and called, 'mere adjuncts to human immortality....' Gods, how you must have hated Man!"

Corll said nothing, leaning over the weapon control and watching the smear of tiny red forms thicken on the wreckage of the giants.

"But perhaps even you forgot the ants," Shedde concluded bitterly.

The warriors surged forward in a solid wave that covered all four faces of the anteroom. Corll zig-zagged his flame through them, but there was no thrill in watching a black line razor across an attack condensed in the sights to an amorphous stain. More of the insects flowed over a surface pitted by earlier destruction. Corll did not raise his thumb, but the ants crawled forward more quickly than he could traverse his weapon across their rectangular advance.

Shedde, answering the question Corll had been too harried to ask, said, "The small ones can't smash open the door, but they'll be able to short out the weapon heads."

Corll whipped his control about in a frenzy. With someone to fight the right-hand beam as well, the wave could have been stopped. But -- a scarlet runnel leaked across the wall toward the other wire-framed gun muzzle, and Corll realized the same thing must be happening in the dead area too close to his own weapon to be swept by its fire. A moment later the beam of deadly light vanished in coruscance and a thunder-clap that shook the blockhouse and flung the remains of the first dead giant a dozen yards from the entrance. Corll leaped for the other control. He was not quick enough. As soon as he touched the firing stud, the right-hand weapon also shorted explosively.

The sighting displays still worked. A third giant ant scabbled noisily into the anteroom, its feelers stiff before it. Held easily between its mandibles was a huge fragment of stone.

"Shedde," Corll hissed, "this door won't hold any longer than the other one did. How can we get out of here?"

"You can leave any time through the tunnel," Shedde replied calmly. "Hargen must have kept a vehicle of some sort there."

Corll hurled himself again toward the low doorway. Again the unseen barrier slammed him back. The anteroom door clanged, denting inward slightly.

"It throws me back!"

"It throws me back," Shedde corrected gently. "Hargen's sense of humor, you see. Unstrap me and get away from here."

The door rang again. Flakes spalled off from the inside.

Corll seized a machine of unguessed precision and smashed it into the quivering metal. "I carried you since the day my father died!" he shouted. "My stomach fed you, my lungs gave you air, my kidneys cleared your wastes. Shedde, my blood is your blood!"

"Your family has served my needs for more years than even I can remember," Shedde stated, utterly calm. "Now that you can no longer serve me, serve yourself and your own race. Quickly now, the door can't hold much longer."

The panel banged inward again.

Corll cringed back, in horror rather than in fear. "Shedde," he pleaded, "you are the last."

"Somebody had to be. This is as good a place as any, where the end began. Set me down and go."

Keening deep in his throat, Corll fumbled at the massive crossbuckle he had unfastened only once before, while his father shuddered into death after a thirty-foot fall. "Shedde...."

"Go!"

The upper door-hinge popped like a frost-cracked boulder as it sheared.

Sphincter muscles clamped shut the tiny valve in Corll's back as the tube pulled out of it. Only a single drop of blood escaped to glint within his bristling fur. He carefully swung Shedde to the floor, trying as he did so not to look at his burden: the tiny limbs, the abdomen without intestines and with lungs of no capacity beyond what was needed to squeak words through the vocal cords. In the center, flopping loosely, was an appendage that looked like an umbilicus and had served Shedde in that function for millennia. The genitalia were functional, but anything they had spawned would have had to be transferred to a host body for gestation.

The skull was fully the size of Hargen's, which leered vacuously from the floor. Shedde's eyes were placid and as blue as was nothing else remaining on the Earth.

"Good luck against the ants, Corll," the half formed travesty of a man wheezed. "But I'm afraid Hargen may not have seen as clearly as he believed he did when he planned his new race."

Corll clenched his fingers ('To hold tools for your children,' Hargen had said so long ago) and sprang upright. 'A stupid servant is a useless servant' -- Hargen had said that too, and Corll's forehead bulged with a brain to equal that of the man he had carried. But in Corll's eyes bled a rage that was the heritage of the wolf and had not been totally expunged from the most pampered of lap dogs.

But the man on the floor whispered, "Go, my friend."

And as the first of the giants smashed into the room, Corll whirled and leaped for the tunnel door and darkness.

The Motivation

by David Langford

Born in 1953 in South Wales, David Longford has been a bit of gadfly and a bit of Monty Python to the science fiction community for some years now through his fanzine, Ansible, and through his satirical novels and stories. His horror fiction runs from clever parody to grim nightmare. "The Motivation" is one of the latter.

Asked to account for his whereabouts since his last appearance here (The Year's Best Horror Stories: XIII), Langford reports: "Ansible quietly folded, not before picking up a Hugo. Monthly SFIfantasy review column in the British games (God knows why) magazines White Dwarf (to 1988) and GM (1988 onward). Published Earthdoom! with John Grant (1987), a spoof disaster novel in which every disaster happens from polar slippage to invading aliens, and the parody collection The Dragonhiker's Guide to Battlefield Covenant at Dune's Edge: Odyssey Two (1988), including 'The Thing in the Bedroom' of XIII fame. Sold and collected full payment for another Grant collaboration, Guts, which does for horror what Earthdoom! did for public toilets, but in the end the publishers were too terrified to print it (we keep the money and are selling it elsewhere)." Hope Langford remembered the zombies.

The shop was a rich stew of smells, dry rot and cigarettes and sweat. Its buzzing fluorescent light couldn't cut through the staleness, and the August sun was not allowed to penetrate. As with every branch of this exclusive chain, the display window was painted dead black; the invisibility of its promised BOOKS AND MAGAZINES was full and sufficient advertisement of the stock.

Peter Edgell reminded himself regularly that he was slumming, that this wasn't his true niche in the literary world. An observer, which was it, scanning the customers who fingered BOOKS AND MAGAZINES through their aseptic plastic film. From behind the counter Peter read the customers and savored the emotions that burned as pungently as the shop's smell. Businessmen brimmed with a synthetic heartiness, wielding it like a charm against limp fears. Younger nondescripts let off their little firecrackers of defensive aggression. Those too young were allowed a brief ration of giggles before being chased away; most pitiful were the fossil emotions of the very old, who from long habit cringed furtively and offered token mumbles of "Just getting it for a mate, see?"

Peter welcomed them all, not only because each swing of the door wafted

fresh, clean exhaust fumes through the sweaty closeness: with his half a talent, he saw the pornophiles as raw material. One day his special insight would pin them down in some astonishing piece of journalism, a cancellation of his failures at university and everywhere else. Jessica Mitford, Tom Wolfe, what-sis-name in Private Eye -- he'd be with them one day. The thought was so thumbbed and worn that it skidded past like an overly familiar quotation.

Minor hubbub arose as old Benson ejected a gaggle of browsers from the small back room. He swept them managerially before him, exuding a steady dribble of apology and exhortation, as though dealing with drunks or kids where the secret was to keep talking and keep calm. Peter was checking a wad of magazines being returned for credit at the usual vast discount (you riffled very carefully through the clean-limbed poses, and refused them if pages were either incomplete or stuck together). Benson reached past him to the till.

"Lock up half five like usual," he said, passing a grayish handkerchief over a broadly glistening sweep of baldness. His other hand methodically stripped the till of banknotes -- so that when he looked up and added "I'm trusting you, Peter," it was an effort not to snap back, "What the fuck with?"

"See you tomorrow," said Peter, wondering again about the manager: there was nothing to read from him, as though he had no feelings whatever. Perhaps you got like that after ten years in the trade. A roar of traffic and a gale of carbon monoxide swept through the door as Benson slouched out on the weekly errand which was not supposed to have anything to do with Thursday evening's greyhound races.

A dozen or so literary and artistic items changed hands in the final forty minutes of trade, but business was slack without the lure of the back room. It was a milder breed of customer that Peter finally chased out: men whose longings didn't burn as brightly.

He carried the old, battered till into the back, locked it in the concealed cupboard (cunningly papered over, but outlined with a frieze of greasy fingerprints) dedicated to Stronger Stuff. Which left him half an hour before his bus: this had happened before, and Peter had spent the time in unedifying study of 'strong' goods. His eyes had widened several times as he flicked through; the only after-effect had been a slightly reduced appetite for sausage and chips that evening, and a greatly reduced opinion of certain customers.

The misuse of this art form, he had written conscientiously in one of his notebooks, is a species of Blatant Beast, repelling the assault of our curiosity by

revealing far more than we wish to know.

Today, curiosity took him through the back room into the dusty regions of no-customer's-land. There was a toilet stinking of ammonia; a passageway lined with miscellaneous old stock, growing ever more unsalable as mice chewed it into lace... and the grimy kitchen where the mouse-smell was stronger yet, though all that was ever made there was the tea they drank daily from mugs whose brown inner stain exactly matched that of the toilet. A hair-dryer might have indicated some token concession to cleanliness, but was only used for one of Peter's morning chores: shrink-wrapping the latest literary arrivals.

Peter tugged at the sliding door of the old kitchen cupboard; a beetle ran out as it scraped to one side. Within was the cobwebbed box Benson had mentioned as "good for a laugh." The scrawled caption was simply "DUDS." It had seemed a neat idea, at the time, for one of those articles which one day might found his reputation... an article dealing with what had once been good stout porn, perhaps even Strong Stuff, but which social inflation had rendered as worthless as copper coinage. Peter set great store by ideas and concepts and documentation, a bony framework requiring not too much fleshing out, not too much writing up.

A powerfully musty smell rose as he lifted the flaps of the box. It was stuffed full with the anonymous brown envelopes Benson used for reserve photographs. Peter found himself breathing a little faster, caught in an absurd excitement at the prospect of material, which, as one might put it, not even Benson dared offer for sale. However...

"Tit pictures," he murmured crossly, after a moment. They could hardly market stuff, which would look staid on the racks at W. H. Smith. And the girl's hairstyle seemed alien: she was dated despite nakedness, with even her shape being subtly wrong. Models (in or out of quotes) had evolved a leaner, more predatory look. With waning excitement Peter unearthed poses having all the erotic impact of Victorian family groups; there were even examples of the forgotten art of the pubic airbrush. An envelope marked S/M merely disclosed another of these aphrodisiac lovelies, rendered S/M by the limp whip in her hand.

He flipped faster through the envelopes, not knowing what obscure frisson he'd hoped to find but increasingly certain that it wasn't here. Near the end, though, one caption scrawled on brown manila made him pause. LAMBERTSTOW.

Afterwards, Peter had to remind himself strenuously that he didn't believe in

occult premonition. His little extra edge, his half-baked ability to read people's feelings, was of no more use than a polygraph when confronted with inanimate paper. The sudden blank chill must have come from the name, its incongruity here, its short-circuit connection with old memories. Uncle Owen, that was who... and what would he have thought of young Peter amid the BOOKS AND MAGAZINES?

Uncle Owen had lived in Lambertstow, and something unspeakable had happened, and mother had wiped the place from her private map -- freezing at any mention, ignoring her brother's Christmas cards. Yes. More memories trickled back. In Lambertstow village a name had been added to criminal legend, up there with Crippen, the various Rippers, the Moors murderers. The name was Quinn and no one knew quite what he had done.

The envelope contained several smaller ones, white, each with a printed caption whose indefinable tattiness suggested a hand-operated press. Police photographs leaked from Lambertstow horror case. Remains of Kenneth Quinn. Very violent, for strong stomachs only!! Which left Peter uncertain as to whether the material really was too strong for Benson's hardened clientele, or whether its sale might stir up police interest.

He wasn't sure that he wanted to peer at a corpse, however photogenic, but his inquisitive fingers had already turned back the flap and slid out the first enclosure. A tightening of the gut came even before he could focus on the glossy print; he had never somehow realized that police photographs would be in color. (Why was that? Because they were always in black and white in the newspaper. Of course.) Then he looked at the thing properly, and his first sensation was one of relief.

What lay on the grass under harsh lights was nothing recognizable as human. A long Christmas tree decked with exotic fruits and garlands, tinsel with innumerable points of reflected light; a Dali vision, which through sheer excess, had gone beyond mutilation and deformity. It was odd; perhaps a little disturbing in its abstract forms, but at first glance not at all horrific.

It was a pity, really, that Peter took the second glance.

An observation of G. K. Chesterton's caught up with him later: that one might look at a thing nine hundred and ninety-nine times and be perfectly safe, but to take the thousandth look was to be in frightful danger of seeing it for the first time. Peter thought Chesterton had underestimated the safe exposure period, and sincerely regretted having looked even twice. The second look stirred up dim

memories of an anatomy course at college, or those parts of it he'd attended; with his second look, he made the fatal error of analysis. It was fascinating, compulsive, to trace the relation between the long glittering object and what must have been a man; to consider bubbly ornaments in red and gray as something more than inorganic lumps, more than the polished haematite they called kidney ore; to trace what must have been done here and here with surgical delicacy; to wonder -- try not to wonder -- just when in the painstaking process Kenneth Quinn had actually died...

Prints and envelopes spilled to the floor as Peter jerked up from his squatting position. He made it to the sink in time; the sight of his own thin vomit crawling across the stained and spotted enamel seemed relatively wholesome, like those bracing whiffs of outside pollution in the sweaty shop. // I'd seen it in a movie it would have been all right, a guaranteed fake. The rest was a long anticlimax of cleaning, tidying, drinking many mugs of water, which rinsed the aftertaste only partly, from his mouth and not at all from his mind. After which the bus was long gone and Peter walked two miles to his bed-sitter; for reasons which stayed persistently cloudy, he took one packet of the photographs with him.

That night and in the shop next day, he resolutely thought of other things; but from time to time some detail of the material he sold would tweak at his memory and make him flinch. The hot gloom of the shop was conducive (in idle periods) to thoughts of Lambertstow and his uncle -- his mother's brother, vaguely isolated from the family as "not one of our sort," maternal condemnation of one who remained a mere farmhand while she became a typist and married an accountant.

Peter had enjoyed Uncle Owen: he remembered jokes, erratic conjuring tricks, and hilarious chases in the woods near Lambertstow. He'd been ten, perhaps younger. He'd been eleven when the something happened, and that part of life had gone dark. Uncle Owen had died a few years later but might as well have died then. Thinking back, Peter saw that mere geographical connection with infamy was enough to make mother sever all links, a theater nurse rejecting contact with the unsterile. Her mind worked that way.

He wondered whether he himself had met Quinn in those days of clear air and sharp colors. No memories presented themselves. He fancied that local kids had mentioned Quinn as one of their teachers, and that they'd liked him well enough. Peter at ten had been bored by such chat, impatient to talk about really interesting teachers like his own.

In the evening, the local library kept late hours. Peter spent some time searching through aged newspapers. Their dry old smell was very different from that of the damp room behind the shop, soporific rather than choking. His first guess at dates hadn't been too far out; in a few months the tragedy and mystery would be a decade old. He made notes of such scanty details as the papers gave, and for the fiftieth time began to plan a clever debut in journalism.

Ten years since Lambertstow horror, he wrote.

Motive for ghastly crime never revealed, but Quinn said to be disliked in neighborhood. Strong feelings in Lambertstow got what he deserved, so reporters claimed after probing locals. Body at edge of wood, confused footmarks in grass, several people involved?? Ritual sacrifice etc. etc. hinted as per usual. No evidence. Filed unsolved (presumably), only Quinn somehow left with bad name. How so? Graffiti, local mood, anonymous letters. Smear bid, whispering campaign, and grass-roots stuff. Some called Quinn in parish even changed name, cf. people called Crippen. Definitely impression Q got just deserts. But what did he do?

On a second sheet of scrap paper: Personal. Uncle O mentioned nowhere, no remote connection; Mother didn't even need that much excuse. Papers evasive on details of what was done; no pics (not surprising). Surgical knowledge needed? Artist too, sort of. Maybe approach through doctor.

There was no third sheet, which might have carried such notes as Why am I doing this? And led into a complicated mire. Peter was happy to have something to do, something to test his talent against, something outside the fascinating dead-end of the shop. Working toward truth had to be a virtue, whatever awkward thoughts came knocking... Some people drove hundreds of miles to gape at seagulls choking and dying in oil slicks; some crowded about road accidents and pointed out to each other the interesting red stains on the asphalt; some holidayed in Germany and were careful not to miss the celebrated resorts -- Buchenwald, Dachau. In his grimy room, which was at least grimy through use rather than decay, Peter remembered and recited his mother's charm against idle speculation:

The centipede was happy quite
Until a frog in fun
Said "Pray which leg goes after which?"

This raised its mind to such a pitch that
It lay distracted in the ditch,
Considering how to run.

Local color was the thing. On the Exeter train, he skimmed the only book about the case, which the library could offer. *He Must Be Wicked To Deserve Such Pain*; an essay on enormity. Though the title quotation, which Peter thought might be Shakespeare, summed up neatly enough that feeling about Quinn, he found the text disappointing. The aristocratic lady author was more concerned with a generic "sickness of society," and with how shops like Benson's led inevitably down the primrose path to this sort of thing, than with the event itself. Like the magazines Peter sold, she promised more than could ever be delivered. He slapped the book shut in irritation, in guilty disappointment, on the closing quotation: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereon one must remain silent."

Local color, he told himself, and wondered if he were telling the truth. One should be able to sit at ease in north London and read up on anything. But during the long wait for a bus at Exeter, he had to admit to himself that it would be interesting to try and reach Dr. Janice Barry, mentioned in the papers as the Lambertstow GP. Certain questions might have gone unasked, ten years back, and he wanted to ask them. The prospect was utterly terrifying; but proper reporters had to ask people awkward questions and so he supposed he must as well. He wore mirror sunglasses, which he hoped would give him confidence by making him unreadable.

Coffee on the train had left a sour taint in his mouth, which as the leisurely bus wobbled through suburbs and lanes gave him an illusion of having recently vomited. Flies buzzed in the smoky heat of the upper deck, aimless and happy. Peter crushed one against the window.

Lambertstow was bigger than remembered; defying the cliché of childhood haunts seeming absurdly tiny when revisited. The village had grown, or had been blotted out, its approaches a maze of new estates. Peter rode through layers of accretion to the old High Street at the heart of it all, and peered uncertainly at ordinariness. So late, so long after the event, all witnesses scattered or lost in hiding places ten years deep... The phone directory was the obvious starting point, he decided doggedly as a post office caught his eye; then he gnawed his lip, recalling countrywide directories filling long shelves in London. Still, here he was, after all.

"Bloody hell," said Peter with feeling, a few minutes later. The local directory listed no Dr. Barry.

Asking after "the doctor" led him by stages to an ivied house whose brass plate said. "Dr. Jonathan Sims." After ten years, was it too late to enquire? He pushed through the door into a cool smothering gloom which felt almost ecclesiastical, and groped blindly to a reception window. "I wanted to ask..." the logical lie came to him in a burst of confidence, "about my uncle, Owen Walker, used to live here... I wanted to find Dr. Barry and, er... you don't know?"

The dark-haired woman at the window gave him a tired smile, behind which Peter read a hot flash of exasperation. "I'll ask Dr Sims," she said. And after a pause of unintelligible intercom noises (did real reporters have tricks for coping with that?): "Dr. Barry used to run this practice. Dr. Sims says she's been at a private nursing home for some time. I don't know whether I should, but perhaps if I gave you the address?"

"Please. It's a... an important family matter."

Amazed by this success, Peter took the slip of paper with effusive thanks, and left. The moist heat was like a blow in the face as he closed the door behind him. The address was in Surbiton.

Local color, he reminded himself. To the scene of the crime, yes, definitely. He'd copied a sketch map from one of the papers; the streets seemed to have randomly stretched, contracted, and tilted on hidden hinges to new angles with one another, but eventually he saw the fatal stand of trees. When they first appeared, peeping over a terrace of harsh new brick, they looked uncompromisingly ordinary. Where was the atmosphere of doom? It was only a small patch of woodland (Peter remembered it as larger -- so he had been here once), straggling up a slope just too steep for cultivation. Another obscure thought surfaced: absurdly, he'd been half-prepared to find some plaque or marker -- "The Atrocity of The Decade Took Place On This Spot."

There was only unkempt grass. He sat with his back against a tree, and watched the shadows lengthen. Local color: Today it may seem unremarkable, even dull, but... Useless. He slid out the monstrous photograph and frowned; its repulsion was dimmed a little by familiarity, but he didn't care to look too long.

On -- this -- spot, he thought fiercely, trying to make himself feel more, trying to do the impossible and read a place. There must be some aura... some stain. Now that he'd looked again at the picture, he could see how the landscape might be considered in a different light, changing in the mind's eye, going bad.

From under the trees came a sweet-sour whiff of rotting leaves, and this no longer seemed quite natural. The sluggish air pressed close. Puffy white clouds were wobbling overhead, bulging down at him, disgusting in their nearness and intimacy. The sky, he realized, was stretched tightly just above him; the constricted horizon barely allowed room to breathe. He could not breathe. He could not move. On this spot...

The pulpy ground was ready to engulf him; something glistening and wet was surely just behind, moving with exquisite delicacy and pain under the trees, coming to him. Peter shivered in a cage of shadows. Here in this small, cramped, horrid countryside he found his eyes fixed, frozen, on a tiny mess in the nearby grass (perhaps a bird-dropping), which had become the oozing, lazily turning hub of all the world's vileness...

Peter lurched upright, stomach churning. Automatically, shakily, he began to walk away, his intention of exploring the trees forgotten. This was local color? He'd never felt troubled before with too much imagination, had never been able to read a place. Think, think of something else.

...how interesting to analyze this: a small horrible thing is so much more repulsive than a large. Cf. the failure of giant insects and suchlike in all those movies. A small, fascinatingly yucky thing like whatever was there in the grass. Or like a photograph.

Peter shook his head violently. Walking briskly and without a pause into the village, he tried to shut out all the unspeakable facts for a moment, and probe the motives behind it all. As always, he failed. How could Quinn, how could anyone, deserve that? "Oh, Quinny's okay," the sniggering Lambertstow kids had told him ten years back. The village went by in a blur. Funny you never ran into any of the old kids these days. On the London train he sneered at himself as a coward and an incompetent, but with a deeper sense of comfort, a satisfaction at having read or even for a moment imagined the supposed horror of that locality. This was the insight, which could take you to the top.

At home he wrote it all down as local color, and didn't sleep too well afterwards.

Next day was Sunday, with the heat of fading summer thicker and murkier than ever. Peter fiddled with a much worked-over draft -- *Today I stood on the very spot where the strangely notorious Kenneth Quinn allegedly met his terrible end.*

Even ten years after the horror, it is not a pleasant place etc. -- abandoned it, and walked out to telephone the Treetops Private Home from a nearby booth, which did part-time duty as a urinal.

"Treetops, can I help you?" said a pleasant female voice.

"Is it, er, possible for me to have a word with Dr. Barry?"

"One moment." A pause. "There is no Dr. Barry on our staff, are you sure you have the right number?"

"They... told me I could find Dr. Janice Barry at Treetops," said Peter weakly. He should have known, doctors would stick together and hide one another's addresses, frustrate anyone who might ask awkward questions...

"One moment." A longer pause, during which it occurred to Peter that the woman's ordinary speaking voice must be half an octave lower than the strained tones, which drifted with such refinement down the line. "I am sorry. Yes. Miss Barry is & patient at Tree-tops, do you wish to visit her?"

He blinked. It shouldn't be that surprising, now you thought about it, but somehow... "Yes please," he said. "What are your visiting hours?"

The voice sounded a little shocked. "There are no fixed visiting hours at Treetops. You may visit whenever you wish, between 10 a.m. and 8 p.m."

Peter calculated rapidly, and hastily fed in more money. "Hello? Hello? Could I visit at about seven tomorrow evening, please?"

"Certainly. Please could I have your name?"

"Edgell. Peter Edgell. A friend of a friend."

"Thank you."

Monday was a trifle cooler, but still nowhere near comfortable. The shop seemed to attract a higher than usual proportion of nutters, people who wandered in asking for The Times or the latest science fiction magazine; there was even one twerp who, without glancing at the stock, enquired about first editions of James Branch Cabell. (Peter had wondered for a moment whether this was an esoteric code phrase.) Although you knew where you were in the shop and could laugh a little at the customers' feelings, Monday stretched unbearably, each minute longer than the one before, until it was a surprise to see Benson fussing browsers out of the back room and putting an end to the day's literary business.

The bus was crowded, and stank. The tube was worse. The second bus was less oppressive, rush-hour being past: Peter reached Treetops in good time, perhaps too soon, since he hadn't a very clear idea of what to say.

It was a chubby Victorian mansion, its red and yellow brick impeccably clean; the only tree in sight, though, was some way down the road. A middle-aged woman in a nurse's cap opened the door, her stern aspect launching Peter prematurely into his Me: "Come to visit Doctor -- er -- Miss Barry. She was a friend of my uncle's and I thought I, well, I ought to..."

Her answering smile was like sunlight breaking through forbidding cloud. He read surprised approval, no doubt at finding such nice sentiments in a scruffy youth.

"If you'll just come this way."

The wide hallway smelt of boiled cabbage, only slightly tinged with the inevitable antiseptic. Thick, glossy cream paint covered every surface. Peter followed the nurse up noisy, varnished wooden stairs as she explained in an undertone that Miss Barry sometimes had a little difficulty, if he knew what she meant. "The poor thing wanders sometimes."

Peter wasn't prepared for the room at the top of the stairs. The words "private nursing home" had conjured up images of personal, individual care and attention in comfortably private rooms. This room, whose door said "Hope," was comfortably small, but screens divided it into four cramped segments, each with an iron bed, each bed containing an old woman who lay unmoving. To the boiled-veg and antiseptic reek was added some other smell, sickly and disagreeable.

"Miss Barry!" said the nurse brightly, speaking loudly and very close to the third old lady's ear. "It's Peter Edgell, come to visit you!" She added more quietly, "Ring the bell if there's any trouble," and left.

Peter sat cautiously at the bedside and looked at Janice Barry, whose eyes stared blankly upwards. She could not possibly be more than seventy, but seemed far older. They had dwindled in their sockets, those eyes, like jellyfish withered by a fierce sun; her whole face was shrunken, as though it were a balloon from which a little too much air had been allowed to escape. Her breathing was noisy.

"Miss... I mean Dr. Barry?" No response, but he couldn't stop now, right on the verge of something or other. His newest lie followed straight away. "Do you remember Owen Walker, back in Lambertstow, used to come to you? I'm his nephew, and there was this rumor, I heard he'd been suspected of... what happened

there. It was all a long time ago, but I was wondering if maybe you could help me clear things up a bit."

It really did sound feeble. But some trace of animation had crept over the old woman's face at the mention of Lambertstow. Peter bent closer and made himself repeat his non-question. This time the eyes moved... and behind them he read something wary and knowing.

I have the edge on her. She knows something and she can't hide it from me. This is the start.

"You... No one has talked to me about that for a good many years," she said in a slow wheezing voice, a separate act of concentration shaping each word. "Are you from the police again?"

"No no. I'm -- sort of looking into it. Off my own bat. My uncle."

Dr. Barry coughed. "I suppose you want to ask me the, the usual questions?"

Edgell guessed that his queries were not, could not be as original as he'd hoped. Impatiently he abandoned pretence. Maybe I can surprise her by being blunt, that's the way investigators work.

"The surgical technique," he said flatly.

She smiled. He hadn't thought her face could become any more wrinkled. The animation in and around her eyes was flickering, as though corroded contacts were sparking and smoking, passing power only intermittently. "Did you know I have an inoperable brain tumor?" she said.

Peter blinked, not knowing what to say but reading it as true.

"They tell me I'm just getting old, but I know. Look at me." Her head rocked on the pillow; perhaps she was trying to shake it. "Ah. Quinn was an evil man. Wickedness and corruption, of a sort."

Cautiously, "Then you know why he was... killed?"

She knows something. She really does.

"A brain tumor," Dr. Barry said with satisfaction, or so it seemed. The light in her eyes came on more fully. "Oh yes, the police wanted to know all about that, asked me many a time about surgical training and whether I thought anyone but a doctor could have... But I was a woman, you see. You can't believe what I say."

And he couldn't unravel the complex knot of feelings he was reading in her. "They thought a woman couldn't have done what was done, is that it?" he said, wondering if the old dear really were delirious.

"No more she could, I said, I told them, unless she had, oh, crowds of helpers. They believed that... Quinn was a vile man, you know. That's all I know, officer. I really cannot assist you any further. Those poor children. They must never know. It was a work of art... Do you play rugby? My brother was very fond of rugby once."

The room seemed to be growing colder, full of harsh, ragged breathing. Peter remembered his own great-aunt, so vague in the present decade, so diamond-sharp when speaking of the past. He felt so close; he leaned closer still. "Why was it done? What had Quinn done?"

"He must be wicked to deserve such pain... did you read that book? A very silly book." She breathed again, deeply, and exhaled with a long shudder. "My diagnosis is certain, I'm afraid. Prognosis negative. NTBR... I can feel it pressing. It presses in different colors. Why, officer, I don't know anything at all about Mr. Quinn except that he wasn't much liked in the village...No. The things he did. They were very shameful. The things he wanted to do. His name shall be blackened forever and ever amen." It was a long speech, and took a long time.

"Dr. Barry, it is blackened -- somehow. It is. People called Quinn changed their names. You remember, because of the whispering. Did you -- ?" It was there, so close, he could read it but couldn't understand it: a foreign language of emotion.

She was speaking again, more feebly now. The faulty contacts might be passing current, but the power-source itself was failing. "You are all... so... silly. If I wanted to I could tell you half. I shouldn't tease you like this. Did you ever hear tell of the Mary Celeste?"

Peter couldn't decide whether that was relevant, or mere wandering. If only he'd brought a cassette recorder. "Yes?"

"They remember it to this day because nobody knows the how or why. They can't forget it, poor dears. So many of us, if you believe that. And if there's never a word about what Quinn... just, you see, just the hints, if everything is handled just so... Forever. You're not the doctor."

"Please," he whispered, as the feelings he couldn't read faded with her voice. "Please tell me."

For the sake of my brilliant future career.

She giggled, protected from the entire world by her inoperable brain tumor. (NTBR she had said -- not to be resuscitated -- was that already written in some folder here?) For a moment her fading eyes were those of a little girl.

"Shan't," she whispered. "You wouldn't want to spoil it all?" And began to laugh, a small weak laugh that hardened into a sort of spasm, a glistening line of saliva running from the corner of her mouth as the shriveled body trembled in private glee.

His final attempt to spy on her secrets read nothing that made sense: a fading Rorschach pattern of feelings, a meaningless bright symmetry like a Christmas tree. Peter pressed the bell-push. The nurse appeared and dismissed him from the bedside with a flick of her eyes.

"You can't believe anything poor Miss Barry says," she warned in a low voice as he left the room. Now, perhaps, was the moment for shrewd questions and even a small bribe -- anything to learn more of those so-called wanderings and ravings. But, studying the nurse's stern competence and impatient eyes, reading the professional hardness, which made Treetops endurable, he quailed at last.

"Goodbye," he mumbled, and felt as the big door closed behind him that he was leaving under a faint cloud.

And so I left the dying Dr. Barry, who will surely take the monstrous secret of Lambertstow with her on her painful descent toward the solution of that other, final question which remains eternally tantalizing until it is answered.

Peter leant back from the typewriter, unsatisfied but with a sense of having partly avenged his frustration. He had at least had the last word.

"Quinny's all right," the Lambertstow school kids had told him in the long ago. "He's a fantastic guy, gives you things and all. You know. You ought to meet him." Had he been able to read people back then? Kids were so boring, self-centered, anyway.

Peter stared at the blank wall of his room and shrugged; the mystery was unyielding! Monolithic. Pulling the painfully typed sheet from the machine, he filed it carefully with all the other notes and outlines for articles he thoroughly intended to write, one day very soon. Perhaps when he could afford a word processor; that should solve his productivity problems. Perhaps.

Meanwhile, there was always his private gallery of the emotions, where offbeat feelings and longings came to disport themselves for Peter Edgell's dispassionate amusement. There was always the shop.

The Guide

by Ramsey Campbell

The very busy Ramsey Campbell has once again managed to place two stories in the same volume of The Year's Best Horror Stories. While the influence of other authors on Campbell's work has often been noted -- that of H.P. Lovecraft on his early writing, and later that of Robert Aickman -- the ghostly hand of M.R. James has not so often shown itself. When it has, Campbell has learned well from his master, as this story proves.

Of "The Guide" Campbell explains: "Part of the fragment at the center of 'The Guide' -- the sentence about the spider in human form -- presented itself to me in exactly those words while I was strolling with the family in Delamere Forest. When Paul Olsen asked me to contribute a traditional tale to Post Mortem, / decided to make it a somewhat didactic piece, because I'd been growing impatient with writers advising younger writers not to learn from the classics of the field: since I'd learned so much from M.R. James, I decided that I'd try to write a tale which would seek to demonstrate that his structure is still vital - - with what success, the reader must judge."

With some success, it would appear. Noted British critic and reviewer, Mike Ashley, says of "The Guide": "It's a gem of a story and, to my mind, the best Jamesian pastiche I've ever read."

The used bookshops seemed to be just as useless. In the first, Kew felt as if he had committed a gaffe by asking for the wrong James or even by asking for a book. The woman who was minding the next bookshop, her lap draped in black knitting so voluminous that she appeared to be mending a skirt she had on, assured him that the bookseller would find him something in the storeroom. "He's got lots of books in the back," she confided to Kew, and as he leaned on his stick and leafed through an annual he'd read seventy years ago, she kept up a commentary: "Fond of books, are you? I've read some books, books I'd call books. Make you sneeze, though, some of these old books. Break your toes, some of these books, if you're not careful. I don't know what people want with such big books. It's like having a stone slab on top of you, reading one of those books..." As Kew sidled toward the door she said ominously, "He wouldn't want you going before he found you your books."

"My family will be wondering what's become of me," Kew offered, and fled.

Holidaymakers were driving away from the beach, along the narrow street of shops and small houses encrusted with pebbles and seashells. Some of the shops were already closing. He made for the newsagent's, in the hope that though all the horror books had looked too disgusting to touch, something more like literature might have found its way unnoticed onto one of the shelves, and then he realized that what he'd taken for a booklover's front room, unusually full of books, was in fact a shop. The sill inside the window was crowded with potted plants and cacti. Beyond them an antique till gleamed on a desk, and closer to the window, poking out of the end of a shelf, was a book by M. R. James.

The door admitted him readily and tunefully. He limped quickly to the shelf, and sighed. The book was indeed by James: Montague Rhodes James, O. M., Litt. D., F. B. A., F. S. A., Provost of Eton. It was a guide to Suffolk and Norfolk.

The shopkeeper appeared through the bead curtain of the doorway behind the desk. "That's a lovely book, my dear," she croaked smokily, pointing with her cigarette, "and cheap."

Kew glanced at the price penciled on the flyleaf. Not bad for a fiver, he had to admit, and only today he'd been complaining that although this was James country there wasn't a single book of his to be seen. He leafed through the guide, and the first page he came to bore a drawing of a bench end, carved with a doglike figure from whose grin a severed head dangled by the hair. "I'll chance it," he murmured, and dug his wallet out of the pocket of his purple cardigan.

The shopkeeper must have been too polite or too eager for a sale to mention that it was closing time, for as soon as he was on the pavement he heard her bolt the door. As he made his way to the path down to the beach, a wind from the sea fluttered the brightly striped paper in which she'd wrapped the volume. Laura and her husband Frank were shaking towels and rolling them up while their eight-year-olds kicked sand at each other. "Stop that, you two, or else," Laura cried.

"I did say you should drop me and go on somewhere," Kew said as he reached them.

"We wouldn't dream of leaving you by yourself, Teddy," Frank said, brushing sand from his bristling gingery torso.

"He means we'd rather stay with you," Laura said, yanking at her swimsuit top, which Kew could see she hadn't been wearing.

"Of course that's what I meant, old feller," Frank shouted as if Kew were deaf.

They were trying to do their best for him, insisting that he come with them on this holiday -- the first he'd taken since Laura's mother had died -- but why couldn't they accept that he wanted to be by himself? "Grand-dad's bought a present," Bruno shouted.

"Is it for us?" Virginia demanded.

"I'm afraid it isn't the kind of book you would like."

"We would if it's horrible," she assured him. "Mum and dad don't mind."

"It's a book about this part of the country. I rather think you'd be bored."

She shook back her hair, making her earrings jangle, and screwed up her face. "I already am."

"If you make faces like that no boys will be wanting you tonight at the disco," Frank said, and gathered up the towels and the beach toys, trotted to the car which he'd parked six inches short of a garden fence near the top of the path, hoisted his armful with one hand while he unlocked the hatchback with the other, dumped his burden in and pushed the family one by one into the car. "Your granddad's got his leg," he rumbled when the children complained about having to sit in the back seat, and Kew felt more of a nuisance than ever.

They drove along the tortuous coast road to Cromer, and Kew went up to his room. Soon Laura knocked on his door to ask whether he was coming down for an aperitif. He would have invited her to sit with him so that they could reminisce about her mother, but Frank shouted "Come on, old feller, give yourself an appetite. We don't want you fading away on us."

Kew would have had more of an appetite if the children hadn't swapped horrific jokes throughout the meal. "That's enough, now," Laura kept saying. Afterwards coffee was served in the lounge, and Kew tried to take refuge in his book.

It was more the M. R. James he remembered nostalgically than he would have dared hope. Comic and macabre images lay low amid the graceful sentences. Here was "that mysterious being Sir John Shorne", Rector of North Marston, who "was invoked against ague; but his only known act was to conjure the devil into a boot, the occasion and sequelae of this being alike unknown." Here were the St. Albans monks, who bought two of St. Margaret's fingers; but who, Kew wondered, were the Crouched Friars, who had "one little house, at Great Whelnetham"? Then there were "the three kings or young knights who are out hunting and pass a

churchyard, where they meet three terrible corpses, hideous with the ravages of death, who say to them, 'As we are, so will you be' " -- a popular subject for decorating churches, apparently.

Other references were factual, or at least were presented as such: not only a rector named Blastus Godly, but a merman caught at Orford in the thirteenth century, who "could not be induced to take an interest in the services of the church, nor indeed to speak." Kew's grunt of amusement at this attracted the children, who had finished reading the horror comics they'd persuaded their father to buy them. "Can we see?" Virginia said.

Kew showed them the sketch of the bench-end with the severed head, and thought of ingratiating himself further with them by pointing out a passage referring to the tradition that St. Erasmus had had his entrails wound out of him on a windlass, the kind of thing their parents tried half-heartedly to prevent them from watching on videocassette. Rebuking himself silently, he leafed in search of more acceptably macabre anecdotes, and then he stared. "Granddad," Bruno said as if Kew needed to be told, "someone's been writing in your book."

A sentence at the end of the penultimate chapter -- "It is almost always worth while to halt and look into a Norfolk church" -- had been ringed in grayish ink, and a line as shaky as the circumscription led to a scribbled paragraph that filled the lower half of the page. "I hope they knocked a few quid off the price for that, old feller," Frank said. "If they didn't I'd take it back."

"Remember when you smacked me," Laura said to Kew, "for drawing in one of mummy's books?"

Frank gave him a conspiratorial look which Kew found so disturbing that he could feel himself losing control, unable to restrain himself from telling Laura that Virginia shouldn't be dressed so provocatively, that the children should be in bed instead of staying up for the disco, that he was glad Laura's mother wasn't here to see how they were developing... He made his excuses and rushed himself up to his room.

He should sleep before the dull sounds of the disco made that impossible, but he couldn't resist poring over the scribbled paragraph. After a few minutes he succeeded in deciphering the first phrase, which was underlined. "Best left out," it said.

If the annotation described something better than the book included, Kew would like to know what it was. Studying the phrase had given him a headache,

which the disco was liable to worsen. He got ready for bed and lay in the dark, improvising a kind of silent lullaby out of the names of places he'd read in the guidebook:

"Great Snoring and Creeling St. Mary,
Bradfield Combust and Breckles and Snape;
Herringfleet, Rattlesden, Chipley and Weeting;
Bungay and Blickling and Diss..."

Almost asleep, too much so to be troubled by the draught that he could hear rustling paper near his bed, he wondered if the scribbled phrase could mean that the omission had been advisable. In that case, why note it at such length?

He slept, and dreamed of walking from church to church, the length and breadth of East Anglia, no longer needing his stick. He found the church he was looking for, though he couldn't have said what his criteria were, and lay down beneath the ribbed vault that somehow reminded him of himself. Laura and the children came to visit him, and he sat up. "As I am, so will you be," he said in a voice whose unfamiliarity dismayed him. They hadn't come to visit but to view him, he thought, terrified of doing so himself. It seemed he had no choice, for his body was audibly withering, a process which dragged his head down to show him what had become of him. Barely in time, his cry awakened him.

If the dream meant anything, it confirmed that he needed time by himself. He lay willing his heartbeat to slacken its pace; his eardrums felt close to bursting. He slept uneasily, and woke at dawn. When he limped to the toilet, his leg almost let him down. He hawked, splashed cold water on his face, massaged his hands for several minutes before opening the book. If he couldn't reread James's ghost stories, then viewing a location that had suggested one of them might be as much of an experience.

The book fell open at the scribbled page, and he saw that the line beneath the phrase he'd read last night wasn't underlining after all. It led from the next word, which was "map", across the page and onto the fore-edge. Rubbing together his fingers and thumb, which felt dusty, he opened the book where the line ended, at a map of Norfolk.

The line led like the first thread of a cobweb to a blotch on the Norfolk coast, where the map identified nothing in particular, showing only beach and

fields for miles. The next scribbled phrase, however, was easily read: "churchyard on the cliff -- my old parish." It sounded irresistibly Jamesian, and not to his family's taste at all.

In the hotel lounge before breakfast he read on: "There was a man so versed in the black arts that he was able to bide his time until the elements should open his grave..." Either Kew was becoming used to the scrawl or it grew increasingly legible as it progressed. He might have read more if the family hadn't come looking for him. "We're going to give granddad a good day out today, aren't we?" Frank declared.

"We said so," Bruno muttered.

Virginia frowned reprovingly at him. "You have to say where we're going," she told her grandfather with a faintly martyred air.

"How about to breakfast?" At the table he said to the children "I expect you'd like to go to Hunstanton, wouldn't you? I understand there are dodgems and roller coasters and all sorts of other things to make you sick."

"Yes, yes, yes," the children began to chant, until Laura shushed them, "That doesn't sound like you, daddy," she said.

"You can drop me off on your way. I've found somewhere I want to walk to, that wouldn't have anything to offer you youngsters."

"I used to like walking with you and mummy," Laura said, and turned on her son. "That's disgusting, Bruno. Stop doing that with your egg."

Kew thought of inviting her to walk to the church with him, but he'd seen how intent Frank and the children had become when she'd hinted at accompanying him. "Maybe we'll have time for a stroll another day," he said.

He sat obediently in the front seat of the car, and clutched his book and his stick while Frank drove eastward along the coast road. Whenever he spoke, Frank and Laura answered him so competitively that before long he shut up. As the road swung away from the coast, the towns and villages grew fewer. A steam train paced the car for a few hundred yards as if it were ushering them into James's era. A sea wind rustled across the flat land, under a sky from which gulls sailed down like flakes of the unbroken cloud. On the side of the road toward the coast, the stooped grass looked pale with salt and sand.

Apart from the occasional fishmonger's stall at the roadside, the miles between the dwindling villages were deserted. By the time the car arrived at the

stretch of road that bordered the unnamed area, which the blotch of grayish ink marked on the map, Bruno and Virginia had begun to yawn at the monotonousness of the landscape. Where a signpost pointed inland along a road, an inn stood by itself, and beyond it Kew saw an unsignposted footpath that led toward the sea. "This'll do me. Let me out here," he said.

"Thirsty, old feller? This one's on me."

Kew felt both dismayed by the idea of being distracted from the loneliness of the setting and ashamed of his feelings. "They'll be open in a few minutes," Laura said.

"Boring, boring," the children started chanting, and Kew took the opportunity to climb out and close the door firmly. "Don't spoil the children's day on my account," he said, "or mine will be spoiled as well."

Now he'd made it sound as if they were ruining his holiday. He patted Laura's cheek awkwardly, and then Virginia's, and leaned back from the open window. "Five o'clock here suit you?" Frank said. "If we're late, there's always the pub."

Kew agreed, and watched the car race away. The children waved without turning their heads, but Laura kept him in sight as long as she could. Just as the car reached the first bend, Kew wanted to wave his stick urgently, to call out to Frank that he'd changed his mind. Six hours out here seemed a more generous helping of solitude than even he needed. Then the car was gone, and he told himself that the family deserved a break from him.

He sat on a rustic bench outside the building striped with timber, and turned to the scribbled page while he waited for the door to be unlocked. He found he was able to read straight on to the end, not least because the ink appeared darker. "There was a man so versed in the black arts that he was able to bide his time until the elements should open his grave; only the passage of so many years, and the stresses to which the falling away of the land subjected the grave, twisted not only the coffin almost beyond recognition but also what laired within. Imagine, if you will, a spider in human form with only four limbs, a spider both enraged and made ungainly by the loss, especially since the remaining limbs are by no means evenly distributed. If anything other than simple malevolence let him walk, it was the knowledge that whoever died of the sight of him would be bound to him."

Kew shivered and grinned at himself. So he could still derive a frisson from that kind of writing, all the more pleasurable when he remembered that James had

never believed in his ghosts. Was it really possible that Kew was holding in his hands an unpublished episode by James? He didn't know what else to think. He gazed along the path through the swaying grass and wondered what it led to that had produced the description he'd just read, until the sound of bolts being slid back made him jump.

The landlord, a hairy bespectacled man whose ruddiness and girth suggested that he enjoyed his beer, looked out at Kew and then at the book. "Bit out of your way if you're walking, aren't you?" he said, so heartily that it served as a welcome. "Come in and wet your whistle, my lad."

A bar bristling with decorated handles and thick as a castle parapet marked off a quarter of the L-shaped room, beyond which were a few small tables draped with cloths, and a staircase guarded by a visitors' book. The landlord hauled on the nearest handle and gave Kew a pint of murky beer. "I was driven here," Kew explained. "I'm just about to start walking."

"Are you not using that book?"

"Why, do you know it?"

"I know all of that man's work that's set around this countryside. He had the touch, and no mistake." The landlord pulled himself a pint and drank half of it in one gulp. "But he didn't find anything round here that he wanted to write about."

Kew thought of showing the landlord the annotation but wasn't quite sure of himself. "Do you know if he ever came this way?"

"I should say so. He signed the book."

Excitement made Kew grip the handle of his tankard. "Could I see?"

"Certainly, if I can dig it out. Were you thinking of eating?" When Kew said that he better had, the landlord served him bread and cheese before unlocking a cupboard beside the stairs. Kew glanced at the handwritten paragraph to remind himself what the writing looked like, and then watched the landlord pull out visitor's book after visitor's book and scan the dates. Eventually he brought a volume to Kew's table. "Here he is."

Kew saw the date first: 1890. "He hadn't written any of his stories then, had he?"

"Not one."

Kew ran his gaze down the column of faded signatures, and almost didn't see the name he was searching for. As he came back to it he saw why he had passed over it: the signature bore no resemblance to the handwriting in the guidebook. He sighed, and then sucked in a breath. The signature directly beneath James's was in that handwriting.

Was the signature "A. Fellows"? He touched it with his fingertip, and tried to rub the cobwebby feel of it off his finger with his thumb. "Who was this, do you know?"

"Whoever came after Monty James."

The landlord seemed to be trying not to grin, and Kew gazed at him until he went on. "You'd think these East Anglians would be proud to have James write about their countryside," the landlord said, "but they don't like to talk about his kind of stories. Maybe they believe in that kind of thing more than he did. The chap who ran this place was on his deathbed when he told my father about that signature. It seems nobody saw who made it. It's like one of Monty's own yarns."

"Have you any idea where James had been that day?"

"Some old ruin on the cliff," the landlord said, and seemed to wish he had been less specific.

"Along the path outside?"

"If it was, there's even less there now, and you'll have noticed that he didn't think it had any place in his book."

The annotator had believed otherwise, and Kew thought that was a mystery worth investigating. He finished his lunch and drained his tankard, and was at the door when the landlord said "I wouldn't stray too far from the road if I were you. Remember we're open till three."

This felt so like the protectiveness Kew had escaped earlier that he made straight for the path. Didn't anyone think he was capable of taking care of himself? He'd fought in the war against Hitler, he'd been a partner in an accountancy firm, he'd run every year in the London marathon until his leg had crippled him; he'd tended Laura's mother during her last years and had confined himself to places where he could wheel her in her chair, and after all that, he wasn't to be trusted to go off the road by himself? James had followed the path, and it didn't seem to have done him any harm. Kew stuffed the book under one arm and tramped toward the sea, cutting at the ragged grassy edges of the path with his stick.

The fields of pale grass stretched into the distance on both sides of him. The low cloud, featureless except for the infrequent swerving gull, glared dully above him. After twenty minutes' walking he felt he had scarcely moved, until he glanced back and found that the inn was out of sight. He was alone, as far as he could see, though the grass of the fields came up to his shoulder now. A chilly wind rustled through the fields, and he limped fast to keep warm, faster when he saw a building ahead.

At least, he thought it was a building until he was able to see through its broken windows. It was the front wall of a cottage, all that remained of the house. As he came abreast of it he saw other cottages further on, and a backward look showed him foundations under the grass. He'd been walking through a ruined village without realizing. One building, however, appeared still to be intact: the church, ahead at the edge of the ruins.

The church was squat and blackened, with narrow windows and a rudimentary tower. Kew had to admit that it didn't look very distinguished -- hardly worth singling out for the guidebook -- though wasn't there a large gargoyle above one of the windows that overlooked the wide gray sea? In any case, the sight of the church, alone on the cliff top amid the fringe of nodding grass, seemed worth the walk. He threw his shoulders back and breathed deep of the sea air, and strode toward the church.

He needn't have been quite so vigorous; there was nobody to show off for. He had to laugh at himself, for in his haste he dug his stick into a hole in the overgrown pavement and almost overbalanced. Rather than risk tearing the paper jacket by trying to hold onto the guidebook, he let the book fall on the grass, where it fell open at the scribbled page.

He frowned at the handwriting as he stooped carefully, gripping the stick, and wondered if exposure to sunlight had affected the ink. The first lines appeared blurred, so much so that he couldn't read the words "best left out" at all. Perhaps the dead light was affecting his eyes, because now he peered toward the church he saw that there was no gargoyle. He could only assume that the wind had pushed forward the withered shrub, which he glimpsed swaying out of sight around the corner closest to the sea, and a trick of perspective had made it look as if it were protruding from high up on the wall.

The church door was ajar. As Kew limped in the direction of the cliff edge, to see how stable the foundations of the building were, he discerned pews and an altar in the gloomy interior, and a figure in black moving back and forth in front of the glimmering altar. Could the church still be in use? Perhaps the priest was

another sightseer.

Kew picked his way alongside the building, over illegibly weathered gravestones whose cracks looked cemented with moss, to the jagged brink, and then he shoved the book under the arm that held the stick and grabbed the cold church wall to support himself. Apart from the slabs he'd walked on, the graveyard had vanished; it must have fallen to the beach as the centuries passed. The church itself stood at the very edge of the sheer cliff now, its exposed foundations sprouting weeds that rustled in the sandy wind. But it wasn't the precariousness of the building that had made Kew feel suddenly shaky, in need of support; it was that there was no shrub beside the church, nothing like the distorted shrunken brownish shape he'd glimpsed as it withdrew from sight. Beside that corner of the church, the cliff fell steeply to the beach.

He clutched the wall, bruising his fingertips, while he tried to persuade himself that the shrub and the portion of ground on which it stood had just lost their hold on the cliff, and then he shoved himself away from the wall, away from the crumbling edge. As he did so, he heard a scrabbling above him, on the roof.

A chunk of moss, too large to have been dislodged by a bird, dropped on the grass in front of him. He clapped his free hand to his chest, which felt as if his heart were beating its way to the surface, and fled to the entrance to the church.

The priest was still by the altar. Kew could see the blotch of darkness that was his robe, and the whitish glint of his collar. Thoughts were falling over one another in Kew's head: the guidebook was a late edition, and so the scribbled annotation must have been made decades later than the signature at the inn, yet the handwriting hadn't aged at all, and couldn't the words in the visitor's book which Kew had taken for a signature have been "A Follower"? The only thought he was able to grasp was how far he would have to run across the deserted land from the church to the inn -- too far for him to be able to keep up the pace for more than a few minutes. He dodged into the gloomy church, his stick knocking against a pew, and heard a larger movement overhead. "Please," he gasped, stumbling down the aisle into the dimness.

He hardly knew what he was saying or doing, but where else could he go for help except to the priest? He wished he could see the man's face, though rather less fervently once the priest spoke. "It brought you," he said.

It wasn't just his words but also his voice that disturbed Kew. Perhaps it was an echo that made it sound so hollow, but why was its tone so eager? "You mean the book," Kew stammered.

"We mean what you read."

Kew was almost at the altar now. As his eyes adjusted, he saw that what he'd taken to be dimness draping the pews and the altar was a mass of dust and cobwebs. More than the tone and timber of the voice, its forced quality was beginning to unnerve him. "Your friend James thought it, but he didn't write it," the voice said. "We inspired him, and then I had to write it for him."

If James had used the handwritten paragraph in one of his tales and identified the setting as he tended to, Kew thought with the clarity of utter panic, more people would have visited this church. He was backing toward the door when he heard something clamber down from the roof and land just outside the doorway with a sound like the fall of a bundle of sticks and leather. "James nearly saw, but he didn't believe," said the figure by the altar, and stepped into the light that seeped through a pinched grimy window. "But you will," it said out of the hole that was most of its face.

Kew closed his eyes tight. His panic had isolated a single thought at the center of him: that those who died of seeing would be bound to what they saw. He felt the guidebook slip out of his hands, he heard its echoes clatter back and forth between the walls, and then it gave way to another sound, of something that scuttled lopsidedly into the church and halted to wait for him. He heard the priest's feet, bare of more than clothing, begin to drag across the floor toward him. He turned, frantically tapping the pews with his stick, and shuffled in the direction of the door. Beyond it was the path, the inn, and his family at five o'clock, further than his mind could grasp. If he had to die, please let it not be here! What terrified him most, as he swung the stick in front of him and prayed that it would ward off any contact, was what might be done to him to try and make him look.

The Horse Of Iron & How We Can Know It & Be Changed By It Forever

by M. John Harrison

M. John Harrison's most recent novel, Climbers, (Gollancz, 1989) is a mainstream novel dealing with the author's strange hobby of climbing rocks. Of it, Texas émigré fantasy writer Lisa Tuttle says: "it is about a group of people with a particular obsession (even weirder than SF fans) and their ways of enriching/escaping from/making sense of their ordinary daily lives in sordid contemporary Britain. It is written in a 'realistic' mode so heightened as to be hallucinatory. It's brilliant."

M. John Harrison is the most accomplished stylist among British science fiction/fantasy/horror writers working today. Born on July 26, 1945 near Catesby Hall, Harrison now lives in Peck-ham in southeast London. His books include The Committed Men and The Centauri Device (science fiction), In Viriconium and Viriconium Nights (fantasy), The Ice Monkey (horror), and Hot Rocks (with Ron Fawcett) and Climbers (climbing). Frankly, it's really impossible to categorize any of these, as readers of Harrison's work will readily agree. Harrison reports that he hasn't written much fantasy of late, and that after completing his current novel-in-progress, The Course of the Heart, he will probably drift exclusively into the mainstream. I would call that extremely depressing news, but then how does one distinguish between Harrison's mainstream writing and his horror/fantasy?

Recently I switched on in the middle of a television arts program. Two men were molding in brass something which looked at first sight like the stripped carcass of a turkey, that exact, sharp-edged cage of bone which reveals itself so thoroughly through all the strips and flaps of flesh after Christmas dinner. It turned out, though, to be something less interesting, a classical figurine, a Poseidon or Prometheus which systematically lost its magic as the layers of casting plaster were knocked off carefully with the back of an axe. This was so essentially disappointing -- a striptease in which, by removing veils of strangeness and alien signification, the sculptor revealed a value ordinary and easily-understood -- that to replace it I turned off the TV and imagined this:

Another foundry, somewhere in the night, somewhere in history, in which

something like a horse's skull (not a horse's head: a skull, which looks nothing like a horse at all, but like an enormous curved shears, or a bone beak whose two halves meet only at the tip, a wicked, intelligent-looking purposeless thing which cannot speak) came out of the mold, and all the founders were immediately executed to keep the secret. They had known all along this would happen to them. These men were the great craftsmen and engineers of their day. They could have looked for more from life. Yet they crammed down their fear, and got on with the work, and afterward made no attempt to escape.

This was how I learned the secret of the horse, which I now give here, after first holding it across itself like a slip of paper, in a further intrincating gesture:

1: THE FOOL

A young man, in whose dark hair a single strand of gray has recently appeared, decides to set out on a series of excursions suggested by the fall of the cards.

Complex rules will determine the direction of each journey. For instance, the suit being WANDS, he will only go north if the journey is to take place in the second half of the year; or if the next card turned up is a Knight.

Equally intricate rules, whose algebraic clauses and counter-clauses he intuits with each new cast of the cards, cover the choice of South, West and East; of destination; even of the clothes he will wear: but he will always travel by train. This decision is based on the relationship he has identified between the flutter of cards falling in a quiet cold room and the flutter of changing destinations on the mechanical indicator boards at railway stations. This similarity rests, he is willing to admit, on a metaphor: for while the fall of the cards is -- or seems -- random, the sequence of destinations is -- or seems -- controlled.

To represent himself in this affair, the young man -- or "Ephebe" -- has chosen THE FOOL. This card, therefore, will never turn up. He has subtracted it from the deck and keeps it beside him; each afternoon, as the light goes out of the room, it seems to fluoresce up at him from the table or the arm of his chair, more an event than a picture. We move forward through time by the deeply undercutting action of Desire. As THE FOOL steps continually off his cliff and into space, so the Ephebe is always a presence attempting to fill the absence that has brought him forth. He is a wave tumbling constantly forward into each new moment, and his

journeys are thus in every sense a trip. By following the journeys as they fall out, he believes, he will open for himself a fifth direction; and to help identify it he will bring back from each journey an object. These objects or *donnees* will eventually comprise both a "compass" and set of instructions for its use.

All the Ephebe's journeys begin from London.

2: THE MAGUS, representing Heterodox Skills

Some are no more than commuter trips, on trains with automatic sliding doors and the interior design of buses. They arrive at the platform loaded with well-groomed, purposive people who seem prosperous but new to it: clerks and estate agents already a bit pouchy in the face, doing all they can with a shirt and a tie and a padded shoulder to pass themselves off as dangerous, successful accountants from the City -- men and women in their early twenties who pride themselves on looking like self-satisfied bullies.

Trains like this run hourly between Harrow and Euston, through a station called Kilburn High Road, the high walls of which are covered with the most beautiful graffiti. They are not scrawls whose content -- "LUFC wankers die tomorrow" "No brains rule" -- and context are their only significance, but explosions of red and purple and green done with great deliberation and exuberance, shapes like fireworks going off, shapes that bulge like damp tropical fruit, with an effect of glistening surfaces. They are names -- "Eddie" "Daggo" "Mince" -- but names which have been transformed from sign or label into illustration: pictures of names. After them everything else looks dull, the high brick walls of the next station -- Hampstead South -- -resembling the walls of some great windowless linear prison. The children who do this call it "bombing"; they bomb their personalities on to the walls.

When the train stops at Kilburn High Road the doors slide open as if it is waiting for someone and after a long time an old man gets on and goes to an empty seat. His overcoat is belted but he has no shirt on, so you can see clearly the mass of springy yellowish-white hairs between his withered old pectoral muscles. A rank smell comes up from him. As soon as the doors close, he rolls a cigarette and smokes it with relish, smiling and nodding around at the other passengers. The men stare at their polished shoes. The women draw away and look angrily at one another as he pulls back his cuff to consult his watch. This grand gesture reveals

the word FUGA tattooed inside his grimy wrist. "No one dare remind him," the Ephebe muses, "that this is a No Smoking carriage." And then: "We should live our lives the way those children sign themselves, bombing our names on to the prison walls inside our heads."

From this, his first excursion, he brings back a flattened cigarette stub, porous and stained brown at the end where the old man has held it gently between his lips.

3: THE HANGED MAN, representing "the descent of light into darkness in order to redeem it"; in its female aspect, "the Sophia of Valentinus."

New trains run on the line between Wakefield and Huddersfield. Inside them, next to every door, is a sign, which reads: PRESS WHEN ILLUMINATED TO OPEN. Illuminati everywhere should know about this sign. Between Wakefield and Huddersfield illumination is likely to come as a corollary of the abandoned factories visible from the train; the rubbish that clogs the shallow river; the dour failed lives in the houses beyond. What is the Ephebe to do on receiving it? Press the button and jump out of the train?

In the overheated carriages of the 22.01 his journey pulls out like chewing gum; then snaps.

At Dewsbury a tired-looking woman gets up to leave the train. Round her neck she is wearing five or six gold chains, each bearing either her initial or her Christian name. They cling and spill between the tendons of her neck like a delicate gold net. She stands in front of the doors, which will not open for her. The sign is illuminated but she has not noticed it. Soon the train will pull away again and she will still be on it. She looks around with growing agitation. "I just can't work these doors out. Can you?" The Ephebe would like to be able to reply: "What you call yourself, who you claim yourself to be by putting on all your necklaces, is not as important as the act itself." That gesture he believes, of netting or fixing, is what actually identifies her. He would like to be able to explain, "People love you for the identity in the act, an identity so frail they must constantly help affirm it." But all he actually says is, "I think you have to press the button." At this the train gives a lurch, as if it has lost its patience.

From this journey the Ephebe brings back an item of personalized jewelry in the form of the name SOPHIA. The Aeon called Sophia, Valentinus reminds us,

astonished to find herself separate from the Good, mistook for its light the tawdry, bluish flicker of the created world, and flung herself towards it. By desiring God so strongly she fell away from Him and into the city of Alexandria, where she still redeems herself daily as a prostitute. (In some versions of her agony, Sophia becomes the city, and as library, language, labyrinth, is thus the instrument of Mankind's redemption. In others, rather than falling away from the Father, she denies herself to Him in reprisal for some never-defined unkindness to His children.)

4: THE LOVERS, representing "Alchemical Marriage" and the Concordance of Opposites

Now the Ephebe lives along the line.

His journeys divide themselves between those on routes he has never traveled in his life -- such as the one that worms its way, stopping at every station from Shotton on round the coast, from Crewe to Bangor; and those he already knows by heart, so that he can recognize every power pylon, substation or battery hen house between, say, London St. Pancras and Sheffield Central.

He delights in the surprises of an unknown line.

Suddenly the sea is racing along by his shoulder, light spattering off it like frying fat. Later the train crawls past container depots, and a tank farm lit up mysteriously in the night. The guard announces, "Once again lays n gem I do apologize your late arrival and inconvenient cause," and the Ephebe wakes next morning in the Rose & Crown: where like some traveling salesman he feels obliged to guzzle bacon, eggs, sausage and hot tea while he looks speculatively out at the wet provincial street.

As a result of one of these journeys he drifts into a tranced, sensual affair with a young woman a little older than himself who runs her mother's boarding house. In the mornings she serves breakfast to the guests, while he lies in bed imagining the men as they watch her moving about the room with her tray. Though she has already brought him his own breakfast in bed, kissed him, watched him eat it with a kind of unfashionable pride in his appetite, the Ephebe sometimes finds himself envying them what he thinks of as an intensely formal experience of her. They see her only once or twice a year, at the beginning and end of a day. Some of them try to look down her blouse as she puts the crockery on the table; others are

content to talk to her about the weather; yet others are hypnotized by the quick deftness of her hands as she lays out knife, fork and serviette, or calmed by the smell of her body beneath the smell of her perfume.

When he tries to explain this to her she laughs and tells him, "You're so greedy!"

This goes some way towards understanding though perhaps not far enough. Increasingly, after she has taken away his breakfast tray, the Ephebe catches himself staring up through the attic skylight at the heavy white clouds, wondering if he can disguise himself and, like some boy out of a Medieval poem, appear one morning among the commercial travelers at the breakfast table to observe her unobserved: and from this journey he brings back only the sound of her voice as she urges him, "Fuck me. Fuck me," in the night.

5: THE CHARIOT, representing Self Expression

All journeys are enchanted.

It isn't so much that the landscape distracts you, as that something about the motion of the train -- something about the very idea of constant, rushing, forward movement -- makes you restless and slow to settle to anything. You read a few pages of a book and look out at some swans on a canal. A newspaper opened suddenly just down the carriage sounds like rain spattering on the window. Another chapter and you make your way down to the buffet or the lavatory. Between each event a reverie pours itself, as seamless as Golden Syrup, as smooth as the motion of the train. You wonder what the weather will be like in Leeds or Newcastle, turn to the Independent to find out, read: "The world economy is likely to remain subdued."

Looking up from these words to a landscape of hedges and ponds, copses and little embankments, the Ephebe sees with amazement a strange vehicle bounding along beside the railway line.

In a long, complex frame of metal tubing, suspended on four tractor wheels, are cradled: an engine wrapped round with copper pipes and sheaves of old electrical wiring; clusters of what seem to be household butane gas bottles; and, well to the rear, the padded seat of some old-fashioned military jet, into which is strapped a man. Gouts of earth and water spray up from its enormous wheels. From

time to time this whole machine seems to be consumed by a kind of radiant discharge, through which its driver or pilot can be seen helplessly or furiously waving his arms.

Is he a prisoner of his vehicle? Or does he prefer to drive on the edge of disaster like this? He is a wasted old man. When it can be seen, his face runs the gamut of expression, wild with fear one moment, laughing with excitement the next. His long gray hair blows back in the slipstream. His lips contort. He has fastened himself into a tight brown leather suit along the arms and legs of which run clusters of neoprene tubing. Out of these at intervals erupt thick colored fluids, which splatter over his chest or into his eyes. Though he blinks furiously, he suffers the indignity without harm: but wherever the machine is touched it blackens and smokes briefly, and lightning writhes along its chassis members.

One huge wheel flies off suddenly into the air. The old man claps his hands to his face. At that moment the train enters a tunnel, and the Ephebe can see only himself, reflected in the window.

If the appearance of the machine has filled him with astonishment, its disappearance leaves him with a curious mixture of elation and anger he can neither understand nor resolve. By the time he is able to unclench his hands and wipe his forehead, the train has left the tunnel for open ploughland across which spills a tranquil evening light. Wrestling desperately with one another, the old man and his machine have passed back into the dimension from which they came, where they leap and bucket and belly their way forever through rural England, scattering clods of earth, steam, small bushes and dead animals. But in the palm of the Ephebe's hand remains a small intricately machined metal item, melted at one end to slag.

This he brings home with him. For months it remains warm to the touch, as if it had only lately been thrown out of the hearth of the heart.

6: THE TWO OF DISCS, representing Change

Some journeys encourage a different kind of fantasy.

In his journal the Ephebe records:

"For some time I was enchanted by a tiny station called Long Eaton on the main line between Derby and Loughborough. Here, two slatted wooden platforms

surrounded by larch, pine and variegated holly gave the air of a rural halt at once bijou and mysterious: the last place you would expect an Inter City turbine to stop. Sitting in the train, you had no idea what sort of landscape lay behind the woods. The wind rushed through them, so that you thought of yourself as being on some sandy eminence away from which spread an intimately folded arrangement of orchards and lanes, of broad heathland stretching off to other hills. Afternoon light enameled the leaves of the holly. Owls and wood pigeons moved amid the branches. Everything was possible in the country -- or garden -- beyond.

"Then the light passed, the wind dropped and the train began to move again: you saw that the trees were dusty and birdlimed, and that they had hidden only housing estates, allotments, and a light engineering plant. A fat woman with a hyperactive child came into the carriage, sneezed in your face. "Just sit down," she warned the child. Instead it stared defiantly into her eyes for a moment then wandered off to make noises with the automatic door.

"Despite this I always looked forward to Long Eaton, as if I hoped each time that the enchantment would be maintained. Then one day I glimpsed, fleetingly, through the windows of a train speeding in the opposite direction, a station called Haywards Heath (it was on the line between London and Brighton), and realized immediately that both it and Long Eaton were references to a lost type, that intimate little station of middle class children's fiction forty years ago. Conifers and sandy soil; foxes and owls and stolen ponies; gorse and gypsy caravans in a rough field: then some mystery about a pile of railway sleepers near the tracks, shiny with rain in the green light at the edge of the woods."

The Ephebe has recognized his mistake. But is he cured of it? Or does he still hope that one day he will abandon his life as it now is, some freak fall of the cards throwing him into another one in which he gets down from a train at just such a fictional station without even a suitcase and walks towards some granite tor steeped in evening light? Whatever the answer to this question, he brings back from a subsequent journey a children's novel called "Island of Adventure" -- though to give him credit he does not actually read it.

7: THE QUEEN OF SWORDS. "We are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself."

Long journeys encourage the Ephebe to read and write: but they also outline

the great gap between the lived and the written. Under a railway bridge at night, in Glasgow perhaps, he finds himself staring into the window of "Apollo Video Supplies." There on a large screen, the following video clip repeats itself endlessly and silently to the drunks who stagger past:

In front of an Asian boy who watches captivated, a sword is beaten into existence out of the sparks of the anvil. The boy's father lies dead. The boy will grow up to be a Ninja fighter, and avenge him. His eyes are huge now as he discerns his uncertain yet triumphant future in the steel. The sparks stream past.

Exactly what you would expect, thinks the Ephebe, and indeed this boy is only a cliché: but look up from the screen and you can see the orange sparks fly out of it and down the road, where amid the dancing hailstones they light up in other dreary shop-fronts something more than "Winter Woolens -- Reduced".

Language is a scandal because it can make connections like these. Stories pass the experienced world back and forth between them as a metaphor, until it is worn out. Only then do we realize that meaning is an act. We must repossess it, instant to instant in our lives.

8: DEATH. Everything opens to contain its opposite.

Whenever the Ephebe looks up there is something new in the landscape -- gorse spilling down the side of a steep little hill with a farm on top; factory chimneys dissolving in a blaze of sun he can't bear to look at; a clear night somewhere up north, with contrails drawn across Orion and the Dog -- but eventually journeys like this must become tiring. The clean yellow front of an Inter City train, rushing toward the platform in the sunlight, no longer fills him with excitement. He's slept in too many overheated rooms, under thick continental quilts; eaten in too many station cafes; awaited too many connections. He is losing faith in the insights he had, the relationships he formed.

All he remembers about the city he's in is a display of popular wedding stationery -- 20% off -- which, as he walked past it, seemed for a moment to merge indistinguishably with the cigarette ends, burger cartons and supermarket receipts on the pavement: so that for a moment everything became illegible to him, because the floor of the display window and the street, the inside and the outside, were only extensions of each other. He yawns and stares in the mirror. Behind him his bag is packed.

Later, repair works along the line delays the 5.18 Sheffield/St. Pancras, then again by a fault in one of its power cars. It's Sunday. The Ephebe dozes and then wakes up abruptly. The train isn't moving and he has no idea where he is. He looks for lights or signs in the night: only dark fields. He has no watch -- it was broken in Edinburgh -- and the only one he can see belongs to a woman sitting across the aisle. Made of plastic, this has a dial transparent to its own works, greenish flickering cogs in the complexity of which your eye loses the position of the hands. The Ephebe falls asleep again for a moment, dreams briefly of the old man and his strange energetic machine, racing alongside the train but this time looking in, then wakes suddenly in the horrified knowledge that he has cried out in his sleep and the whole carriage has heard him. He has become someone who makes noises in his sleep on the London express: a worn-out middle aged man with bad teeth and a cloth briefcase, his head resting uncomfortably in the corner between the seat-back and the window.

From this journey, though, he brings back a memory of his childhood in Warwickshire.

One July morning, sitting hypnotized by the sound and weight of the river in Stoneleigh Park, he watched the hot sunlight spilling and foaming off the weird until he could no longer separate the look of the water from its strange, powerful, almost yeasty smell. Most of the objects of his childhood, he remembers, were transfigured in this way for him; and he notes in his journal that night:

"Little earthy lanes and banks become secret entry-ways into the warm fields and bemused emotional states of childhood, when in a kind of excited fatigue you watch your own hand come closer and closer to the dry gray wood of an old gate, and find yourself unable for a second to context the one by the other or find a single context -- unless it is something as huge and general as 'the world' -- which will accept both. In the end you are able to understand only the intense existence, the photographic actuality of such objects. In that kind of childhood everything is fused into the light like flowers fused into a glass paperweight. At first I thought this light was in itself a fusing-together of other states or qualities which I could only vaguely label -- "self awareness" "growing sexual curiosity" "the unconditional trances of narcissism." Now I see that the child is contrived wholly of the things he has already experienced: a spider web in the grass, a jet flying overhead; a cocoon of cuckoo-spit, the flare of light off the windscreen of a designer car. These elements are reassembled as a way of looking at other things. It was this continual fusing and re-fusing -- this infolding -- of experience which I perceived as a light bathing the landscape.

"What we call 'meaning' is not what the light discovers, because what it discovers is itself. Now cast by the adult on new objects, it is valuable only for its very act of illumination. Perception is meaning. Meaning is an act."

9: THE MOON, representing "the state of impure horror"; human faculties reach their limit and collapse before the Inward Light.

As soon as the journeys are over, the cards can be laid to rest.

The Ephebe waits in the taxi rank outside Charing Cross Station after his last trip. A short, badly-dressed woman of about twenty five or thirty is walking up and down the station forecourt shouting "You bloody piece of paper, you bloody piece of paper," at a letter she holds in her right hand. Her face is red with effort; her hair straggles down around it. A maroon wool coat like a carpet compresses her fat breasts. "You bloody piece of paper!" Eventually she varies the emphasis on this accusation until it has illuminated briefly every word; as if trying for the feel of some final, indisputable delivery. Her sense of drama, the transparency of her emotion (whether it is unaffected misery or something more complex and theatrical declaring itself) leaves him unnerved.

No one else seems bothered. Out on the Strand the taxis continue to drive homicidally at one another. The people waiting for them laugh and talk about the price of things. But as his cab arrives, and he sees the light dancing in the raindrops on its bonnet, the Ephebe cannot repress a shudder. Later, when he tries to recall the incident, he will be able to fasten only on the minor details -- the minicab touts, for instance, mooching up and down the queue pleading in soft voices, "Any long jobs?" while the woman stares down at her bit of paper like Ellen Terry as Joan of Arc and rubs her free hand in the food stains down the front of her coat.

"You bloody piece of paper!"

That afternoon he sits by the downstairs front window of his small house, looking out into the street. Rain drops steadily on the windowsill. "This drip, which is sometimes doubled, sometimes trebled, syncopated," he once wrote to a friend, "is all that is most monotonous about London residential streets."

In fact it is a street he rather likes: in summer all rain and sunshine and every minute the most surprising and confusing changes of light.

Over the road from the Ephebe's window two beautifully trimmed bushes

stand out against a brick wall. He has no idea what they are. The true word "buddliea" comes to mind when he looks at them; but they are evidently conifers. Under certain lights, especially in the morning -- "When the world looks promising again despite what we know about it" -- the brick takes on an old warm red color. The wall itself seems to recede a little, as if the street had widened, and at the same time it becomes taller and longer. At that, the bushes no longer seem like bushes at all. Rather than being in front of the wall, they define two arch-like spaces in it. It is an illusion: but suddenly the Ephebe seems to be looking through two arches at a hedge some way behind the wall. The effect of this is of a glimpse into the well-matured garden of some great house near Warwick or Leamington, and it always delights him.

Tired out now by his journeys, unable to convince himself of the need to unpack his case, unsure of the success of his experiment, he makes himself a cup of coffee, then another. The room behind him is dim and quiet, full of secondhand furniture.

On a little veneered table he has arranged the incomplete Tarot, THE FOOL which represents himself, and the objects of his search -- a flattened cigarette end stained with nicotine and spittle; an item of personalized jewelry in the form of the name SOPHIA; the vulnerable but determined whisper of a woman approaching her climax in the middle of the night; a small, intricately machined metal object, melted at one end; the children's novel "Island of Adventure"; particles of sleet billowing down an empty pavement; a page from his journal -- though he cannot yet bring himself to do anything with them. Instead, he finds himself watching the school children running up and down the street. At half past four there is an increase in traffic. The rush hour has begun.

About fifteen minutes later the woman he watched this morning outside Charing Cross Station waddles into view from the junction with Harrow Road, crosses on to the opposite pavement, and, going through one of the "arches" in the wall, disappears from view. Sunlight splashes the pavement. Rain falls through it like a shower of parks. Without thinking, the Ephebe leaves his house and rushes after her. The "arch" is closing again even as he passes it. He has the sense of penetrating some material halfway between wood and stone, then something which is neither, something membranous which clings for a moment round his face.

Now he is in the garden. Paths race out everywhere in front of him, across great lawns, between high topiary hedges, over patios paved black and white like chessboards surrounded by gray stone urns and leaden statuary. In this confused, ideal moment, the Ephebe believes he may go anywhere. With a shout of elation he

attempts to fall forward instantly and endlessly in all possible directions; only to find to his dismay that in the very exercise of this privilege he has selected one of them.

The house, in all respects the same as his own, is empty.

Though the carpets have been removed, odd items of furniture remain -- a small inlaid table, an old-fashioned brass fender with grotesque moldings, an ironing board folded up in a corner -- as if some tenant is still in transit.

He sees the woman he has been pursuing, standing quite still in her maroon coat staring out of a bay window in an upstairs room; he sees her through the open door, lumpen and heavy, from the landing at the top of the stairs. Light pours round her thickened, monolithic silhouette, transfiguring the bare floor of the room, illuminating where it spills out on to the landing rolls of dust beneath cream painted skirting boards. He knows that if he were able to enter the room and look over her shoulder now, he would not see North London or his own house. The light fixes him, photographic, frozen; it is the same hot, silvery light which falls on the dense trees on the other side of the valley, giving them the look of giant mosses, thick clumps and curtains of moss of the sort that drips down the ornamental waterfalls in old gardens.

"All the things it might be," a voice says clearly. "The one thing it is."

At this a white bird flies past the three panes of the bay window, its shadow flickering between elongated bars of light over the walls of the room: entering the first pane from the left and leaving from the right, it crosses the third in the same direction, only then flying across the central pane from right to left, after which it vanishes.

"The one thing it is."

The Ephebe knows that he must cross the doorway of this room. He must pass through the moment he finds himself in. Before he can do this, though, the woman must turn toward him, so that he sees balanced on her shoulders the skull of a horse. It is not a horse's head, but a skull, which looks nothing like a horse at all; and out of this enormous curved shears, this wicked bone beak whose two halves meet only at the tip, will come words. "You bloody piece of paper," she must admonish him. Only then will he be able to pass.

"You bloody written thing."

10: THE HIEROPHANT, representing "occult force, voluntarily evoked"

The journeys are over.

The Ephebe, having returned to the front room of his own house and made himself another cup of coffee, has arranged on the veneered table -- alongside the incomplete Tarot, THE FOOL which represents himself, and the objects of his search already noted -- a further nine cards. For each card of the original-spread, we discover, he drew an alternative, which has remained unconsulted until now.

These blind or uncommunicating cards provoke completely different interpretations of his journeys, and of their "meaning" for him and for us. For instance, as an alternative card to THE CHARIOT he drew THE AEON ("God has deconstructed the Old Universe and has learned too much to be able to build another"). Had he looked out of the opposite window of the railway carriage that day, he would have seen only a toddler with a string of snot at its nose, pedaling its plastic tricycle through the weeds, the heaps of dried mud and discarded plasterboard in the back garden of a newly-completed council house in the Midlands. To simulate speed, the child kicks out violently with its little legs, while from its open mouth comes a constant high-pitched imitation of the roar of a jet fighter overhead -- "Nnnnnneaaaaa!"

Here are the alternative cards he drew, in order:

The Nine of Discs; the Six of Wands; the Four of Swords; THE AEON; the Ten of Discs; the Ace of Swords; THE DEVIL; the Princess of Wands; FORTUNE. He is left only with the card he chose to represent himself. This was the Knight of Swords. As he turns it up, THE FOOL, which it replaces, charred and curled as if by some great heat or light, vanishes in incense smoke! He hears the horse repeat gently,

"All the things it might have been."

Initiated now, the Ephebe smiles thoughtfully. Next to THE LOVERS he places the Four of Swords. He remembers the young woman whispering, "Fuck me, fuck me," in the night. What would he have seen if he had turned his head away from her then and looked into the quiet darkness of their upstairs room? The journeys are over. They have just begun.

Jerry's Kids Meet Wormboy

by David J. Schow

*One of the fun things about editing *The Year's Best Horror Stories* over the years is watching new writers emerge from obscurity to renown. And so it is with David J. Schow, once an obscure punk kid and now a well known punk kid. Schow, a German orphan adopted by American parents, was born in Marburg, West Germany on July 13, 1955. Settling in Los Angeles, his short horror fiction began appearing in the early 1980s, while he kept himself alive by writing movie/tv tie-in novels under various pseudonyms. Under his own name, Schow soon became notorious as the instigator of splatterpunk. Despite this, his first novel, *The Kill Riff*, has done well, and is to be followed by *The Shaft* this year. Earlier this year two collections of Schow's short stories were published: *Seeing Red* and *Lost Angels*. The Spring 1990 issue of *Weird Tales* was a special David J. Schow issue, and his anthology of film-related horror stories, *Silver Scream*, proved extremely popular. Further, his first film script, *Leatherface: Texas Chainsaw Massacre III*, and his first TV script, "Safe Sex" for *Freddy's Nightmares*, both got bought and produced -- and ran into censorship problems.*

*"Jerry's Kids Meet Wormboy" was written for *Book of the Dead*, John Skipp and Craig Spector's shared-world anthology based on the world of George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* film series. For those who have avoided this, it seems that the world has been overrun by flesh-eating zombies, see -- and then...*

Eating 'em was more fun than blowing their gnarly green heads off. But why dicker when you could do both?

The fresher ones were blue. That was important if you wanted to avoid cramps, salmonella. Eat a green one and you'd be yodeling down the big porcelain megaphone in no time.

Wormboy used wire cutters to snip the nose off the last bullet in the foam block. He snugged the truncated cartridge into the cylinder of his short-barrel .44. When fired, the flattened slugs pancaked on impact and would disintegrate any geek's head into hash. The green guys weren't really zombies, because no voodoo had played a part. They were all geeks, all slow as syrup and stupid as hell, and Wormboy loved it that way. It meant he would not starve in this cowardly new world. He was eating; millions weren't.

Wormboy's burden was great.

It hung from his Butthole Surfers T-shirt. He had scavenged dozens of such shirts from a burned-out rock shop, all Extra Extra Large, all screaming about bands he had never heard of -- Dayglo Abortions, Rudimentary Penii, Shower of Smegma, Fat & Fucked Up. Wormboy's big personal in-joke was one that championed a long-gone album titled Giving Head to the Living Dead.

The gravid flab of his teats distorted the logo, and his surplus flesh quivered and swam, shoving around his clothing as though some subcutaneous revolution was a-boil. Pasty and pocked, his belly depended earthward, a vast sandbag held at bay by a wide weight lifter's belt, notched low. The faintest motion caused his hectares of skin to bobble like mercury.

Wormboy was more than fat. He was a crowd of fat people. A single mirror was insufficient to the task of containing his image.

The explosion buzzed the floor beneath his hi-tops. Vibrations slithered from one thick stratum of dermis to the next, bringing him the news.

The sound of a Bouncing Betty's boom-boom always worked like a Pavlovian dinner song. It could smear a smile across his jowls and start his tummy to percolating. He snatched up binoculars and stampeded out into the graveyard.

Valley View Memorial Park was a classic cemetery; of a venerable lineage far preceding the ordinances that required flat monument stones to note the dearly departed. The granite and marble jutting from its acreage was the most ostentatious and artfully hewn this side of a Universal Studios monster movie bone-yard. Stone-cold angels reached toward heaven. Stilted verse, deathlessly chiseled, eulogized the departees -- vanity plates in suburbia for the lifeless. It cloyed.

Most of the graves were unoccupied. They had prevailed without the fertilization of human decay and were now choked with loam and healthy green grass. The tenants had clawed out and waltzed off several seasons back.

A modest road formed a spiral ascent path up the hill and terminated in a cul-de-sac fronting Wormboy's current living quarters. Midway up, it was interrupted by a trench ten feet across. Wormboy had excavated this "moat" using the cemetery's scoop-loader, and seeded it with lengths of two-inch pipe sawn at angles to form funnel-knife style punji sticks. Tripwires knotted gate struts to tombstones to booby traps, and three hundred antipersonnel mines lived in the earth. Every longitude and latitude of Valley View had been lovingly nurtured into a Gordian knot of kill-power that Wormboy had christened his spiderweb.

The Bouncing Bettys had been a godsend. Anything that wandered in unbidden would get its legs blown off or become immovably gaffed in the moat.

Not long after the geeks woke up, shucked dirt, and ambled off with their yaps drooping open, Wormboy had claimed Valley View for his very own. He knew the dead tended to "home" toward places that had been important to them back when they weren't green. Ergo, never would they come trotting home to a graveyard.

Wormboy's previous hideout had been a National Guard armory. Too much traffic in walking dead weekend warriors, there. Blowing them into unwalking lasagna cost too much time and powder. After seven Land-Rover-loads of military rock and roll, Wormy's redecoration of Valley View was complete. The graveyard was one big mechanized ambush. The reception building and nondenominational chapel were ideally suited to his needs... and breadth. Outfitting the prep room was more stainless steel than a French kitchen in Beverly Hills; where stiffies were once dressed for interment, Wormboy now dressed them out for din-din. There was even a refrigerated morgue locker. Independent generators chugged out wattage. His only real lament was that there never seemed to be enough videotapes to keep him jolly. On the non-fiction front he favored Julia Child.

The binocs were overpriced army jobs with an illuminated reticle. Wormboy thumbed up his bottle-bottom fish-eye specs, focused, and swept the base of the hill. Smoke was still rising from the breach point. Fewer geeks blundered in these days, but now and again he could still snag one.

That was peculiar. As far as Wormboy could reckon, geeks functioned on the level of pure motor response with a single directive -- seek food -- and legs that made their appetites mobile. Past year one the locals began to shun Valley View altogether, almost as though the geek grapevine had warned them the place was poison. Could be that Valley View's primo kill rate had made it the crucible of the first bona fide zombie superstition.

God only knew what they were munching in the cities by now. As the legions of ambulatory expirees had swelled, their preferred food -- live citizens -- had gone underground. Survivors of what Wormboy called Zombie Apocalypse had gotten canny or gotten eaten. Geek society itself was like a gator pit; he'd seen them get pissed off and chomp hunks out of one another.

Though their irradiated brains kept their limbs supple and greased with oxygenated blood, they were still dead... and dead people still rotted. Their structural integrity (not to mention their freshness) was less than a sure bet past the

second or third Halloween. Most geeks Wormy spotted nowadays were minus a major limb. They digested, but did not seem to eliminate. Sometimes the older ones simply exploded. They clogged up with gas and decaying food until they hit critical mass, then kerblooey -- steaming gobbets of brown crap all over the perimeter. It was enough to put you off your dinner.

Life was so weird. Wormboy felt like the only normal person left.

This movable feast, this walking smorgasbord, could last another year or two at max, and Wormboy knew it. His fortifications insured that he would be ready for whatever followed, when the world changed again. For now, it was a matchless chow-down, and grand sport.

The ATV groaned and squeaked its usual protests when he settled into its saddle. A rack welded to the chassis secured geek tools -- pinch bar, fire ax, scattergun sheaths, and a Louisville Slugger with a lot of chips, nicks, and dried blood. The all-terrain bike's balloon tires did not burst. Wormboy kick-started and pattered down to meet his catch of the day.

Geeks could sniff human meat from a fair distance. Some had actually gotten around to elementary tool use. But their maze sense was zero-zero. They always tried to proceed in straight lines. Even for a non-geek it took a load of deductive logic just to pick a path toward Valley View's chapel without getting divorced from your vitals, and much more time than generally elapsed between Wormboy's feedings. Up on this hilltop, his security was assured.

He piloted the ATV down his special escape path, twisting and turning, pausing at several junctures to gingerly reconnect tripwires behind him. He dropped his folding metal army fording bridge over the moat and tootled across.

Some of the meat hung up in the heat flash of explosion was still sizzling on the ground in charred clumps. Dragging itself doggedly up the slope was half a geek, still aimed at the chapel and the repast that was Wormboy. Everything from its navel down had been blown off.

Wormboy unracked the pinch bar. One end had been modified to take a ten-pound harpoon head of machined steel. A swath of newly muddied earth quickly became a trail of strewn organs resembling smashed fruit. The geek's brand-new prone carriage had permitted it to evade some of the Bounding Betty trips. Wormboy frowned. His announcement was pointed -- and piqued -- enough to arrest the geek's uphill crawl.

"Welcome to hell, dork breath."

It humped around on its palms with all the grace of a beached haddock. Broken rib struts punched through at jigsaw angles and mangled innards swung from the mostly empty chest cavity like pendant jewels. One ear had been sheared off; the side of its head was caked in thick blood, dirt, and pulverized tissue that reminded Wormboy of a scoop of dog food. It sought Wormboy with bleary drunkard's eyes, virulently jaundiced and discharging gluey fluid like those of a sick animal.

It was wearing a besmirched Red Cross armband.

A long, gray-green rope of intestine had paid out behind the geek. It gawped with dull hunger, and then did an absurd little push-up in order to bite it. Teeth crunched through geek-gut and gelid black paste evacuated with a blatting fart noise. Sploot!

Disinclined toward auto-cannibalism, it tacked again on Wormboy. A kidney peeled loose from a last shred of muscle and rolled out to burst apart in the weeds. The stench was unique.

Impatient, Wormy shook his head. Stupid geeks. "C'mon, fuck-face, come and get it." He wagged his mighty belly, and then held out the rib roast of his forearm. "You want Cheez Whiz on it or what? C'mon. Chow tune."

It seemed to catch the drift. Mouth champing and slavering, eyes straying off in two directions, it resumed its quest, leaving hanks and clots of itself behind all the way down.

It was too goddamned slow... wasting too many choice bits.

Hefting the pinch bar, Wormboy hustled up the slope. He slammed one of his size thirteens thunderously down within biting range and let the geek fantasize for an instant about what a craw full of Wormboy Platter would taste like. Greedy. Then he threw all his magnificent tonnage behind a downward thrust, spiking his prey between the shoulder blades and staking it to the ground with a moist crunch.

It thrashed and chewed air. Wormy waved bye-bye in its face. "Don't go 'way, now." He let the geek watch him pick his way back down to the ATV. He wanted it to see him returning with the ax. Sweat had broken freely; the exertion already had Wormboy huffing and aromatic, but he loved this part almost as much as swallowing that old-time home cookin'.

The ax hissed down overhand. A billious rainbow of decomposing crap hocked from the neck stump while the blue head pinballed from one tombstone to

the next. It thonked to rest against the left rear wheel of the ATV.

Wormboy lent the half torso a disappointed inspection. Pickings were lean; this geek had been on the hoof too long. Burger night again.

He looked behind him and sure enough, the lone head was fighting like hell to redirect itself. Hair hung in its eyes, the face was caved in around the flattened nose, the whole of it now oozing and studded with cockleburrs... but by God it tipped over, embedded broken teeth into packed dirt, and tried to pull itself toward Wormy. It was that hungry.

Wormboy went down to meet it, humming. He secured the ax in its metal clip and drew the ball bat.

Busting a coconut was tougher. The geek's eyes stayed open. They never flinched when you hit them.

On the second bash, curds of blood-dappled brain jumped out to meet the air.

It ceased moving then, except to crackle and collapse. The cheesy brain-stuff was the color of fishbellies. Wormboy pulled free a mucilaginous fistfull and brandished it before the open, unseeing eyes. He squeezed hard. Glistening spirals unfurled between his fingers with a greasy macaroni noise.

"I win again."

He licked the gelid residue off his trigger finger and smacked his lips. By the time he got back to the torso with a garbage bag, the Red Cross armband was smoldering. He batted it away. It caught in midair and flared, newborn fire gobbling up the swatch of cloth and the symbol emblazoned thereon, leaving Wormboy alone to scratch his head about what it might have meant.

Little Luke shot twin streamers of turbid venom into the urine specimen cup like a good Christian, providing. He did not mind being milked (not that he'd been asked); it was a necessary preamble to the ritual. He played his part and was provided for -- a sterling exemplar of God's big blueprint. His needle fangs were translucent and fragile looking. Cloudy venom pooled in the cup.

Maintaining his grip just behind Little Luke's jaws, the Right Reverend Jerry thanked his Lord for this bounty, that the faithful might take communion and know His peace. He kissed Little Luke on the head and dropped all four feet of him back

into the pet caddy. Little Luke's Love Gift had been generous today. Perhaps even serpents knew charity.

Jerry pondered charity, and so charitably ignored the fact that his eldest deacon was leaking. Deacon Moe stood in the vestibule, his pants soaked and dripping, weaving back and forth. He was not breathing, and his eyes saw only the specimen cup. The odor that had accompanied him into the tiny room was that of maggoty sausage. He was a creature of wretchedness, without a doubt... but was also proof to the right Reverend Jerry that the myth had delivered at last, and skeptics be damned.

The dead had risen from their graves to be judged. If that was not a miraculous proof, what was? The regular viewers of Jerry's tri-county video ministry had been long satisfied by more pallid miracles -- eased sprains, restored control of the lower tract, that sort of thing. Since this ukase had flown down from heaven, it would be foolish to shun its opportunities.

Jerry savored the moment the dead ones had walked. It had vindicated his lagging faith, dispelling in an instant the doubts that had haunted his soul for a lifetime. There was a One True God, and there was a Judgment Day, and there was an Armageddon, and there was bound to be a Second Coming, and as long as the correct events came to pass, who cared if their order had been juggled a bit? The Lord had been known to work in mysterious ways before.

Once his suit had been blazing white, and pure. With faith, it would shine spotlessly again. Right now he did not mind the skunky miasma exuding from the pits of what had once been a fifteen-hundred-dollar jacket. It helped blanket the riper and more provocative stench of Deacon Moe's presence. The congregation was on the move, and there was little time for dapper grooming in mid-hegira.

Jerry beckoned Deacon Moe forward to receive communion. From the way poor Moe shambled, this might be his last chance to drink of the Blood... since none of the faithful had meshed teeth lately on the Body, or any facsimile thereof.

He had visited an abandoned library, and books had told him what rattlesnake venom could do.

In human beings, it acts as a neurotoxin and nerve-impulse blocker, jamming the signals of the brain by preventing acetylcholine from jumping across nerve endings. The brain's instructions are never delivered. First comes facial paralysis, then loss of motor control. Heart and lungs shut down, and the victim drowns in his own backed-up fluids. Hemolytic, or blood-destroying, factors cause intense local

pain. Jerry has tasted the venom he routinely fed his quartet of deacons. Nothing to worry about, as long as your stomach lining had no tiny holes in it. The bright yellow liquid was odorless, with a taste at first astringent, then sweetish. It numbed the lips. There was so much books could not know.

In walking dead human beings, Jerry discovered that the venom, administered orally, easily penetrated the cheesecloth of their internal pipework and headed straight for the motor centers of the brain, unblocking them, allowing Jerry to reach inside with light hypnosis to tinker. He could program his deacons not to eat him. More important, this imperative could then be passed among the faithful in the unspoken and mystical way that seemed reserved to only these special children of God.

A talent for mesmerization came effortlessly to a man who had devoted years to charming the camera's unblinking and all-seeing eye. Jerry preferred to consider his ability innate, a divine, God-granted sanction approved for the use he made of it. Don't eat the Reverend.

Deacon Moe's coated tongue moistened cracked and greenish lips, not in anticipation, but as a wholly preconditioned response. The demarcations of the urine specimen cup showed a level two ounces. Little Luke could be fully milked slightly more often than once per month, if Jerry's touch was gentle and coaxing. The cup was tilted to Deacon Moe's lips and the poison was glugged down in nomine Patris, et Filii...

"And God waved His hand," Jerry belted out.

"And when God did wave His hand, He cleansed the hearts of the wicked of evil. He scoured out the souls of the wolves, and set His born-again to the task of reclaiming the earth in His name. The Scriptures were right all along -- the meek inherited. Now the world grows green and fecund again. Now the faithful must seek strength from their most holy Maker. The damned Sodom and Gomorrah of New York and Los Angeles have fallen to ruin, their false temples pulled down to form the dust that makes the clay from which God molds the God-fearing Christian. Our God is a loving God, yet a wrathful God, and so he struck down those beyond redemption. He closed the book on secular humanism. His mighty Heel stamped out radical feminism. His good right Fist meted out rough justice to the homosexuals; his good left Fist likewise silenced the pagans of devil-spawn rock and roll. And he did spread His arms wide to gather up the sins of this evil world, from sexual perversion to drug addiction to Satan worship. And you might say a memo came down from the desk of the Lord, and major infidel butt got kicked double-plus good!"

Now he was cranking, impassioned, his pate agleam with righteous perspiration. His hands clasped Deacon Moe's shoulders. His breath misted the zombie's dead-ahead eyes. His conviction was utter. Moe salivated.

"And now the faithful walk the land, brother, as a mighty army. God's legions grow by the day, by the hour, the minute, as we stand here and reaffirm our faith in His name. We are all children of God, and God is a loving Father who provides for His children, yes. Yes, we must make sacrifices. But though our bellies be empty today, our hearts are full up with God's goodness!" His voice was cracking now; it was always good to make it appear as though some passion" was venting accidentally. "From that goodness you and I must draw the strength to persevere until tomorrow, when the Millennium shall come and no child of the Lord shall want. Peace is coming! Good is coming! Go forth unto the congregation, Deacon Moe, and spread this good news! Amen! Amen! Amen!"

Deacon Moe wheezed, his arid throat rasping out an acknowledgment that sounded like an asthmatic trying to say rruuaah through a jugful of snot. Jerry spun him about-face and impelled him through the curtain to disseminate the Word. He heard Moe's stomach-load of accumulated venom slosh. Corrosion was running amok in there. Any second now, gravity might fill Deacon's Moe's pants with his own zombified tripe.

Tonight they were billeted in an actual church. Most of the faithful loitered about the sanctuary. The deacons led them through Jerry's motions; the response quotient of the total group, two-score and ten, was about as dependable as a trained but retarded lab rat. Less control, and Jerry would have starred at his own Last Supper months ago. Right now he saw his congregation only as vessels itching to be filled with the prose of the Lord. He tried to keep them fed as best he could manage.

He was most proud of the glorious day he had commenced his cross-country revival. He strode boldly into the murk of a Baton Rouge honky-tonk and let God say howdy-do to a nest of musicians calling themselves Slim Slick and His Slick Dicks. Marching right behind him were twenty hungry born-agains. That holy purge, that first big feed with which he had blessed his new congregation, would forever burn brightly in a special corner of his heart. Slim Slick, et al., had seen the light. Some of them had joined the marching ministry, those that had not been too chewed up to locomote.

Like Jesus to the temple, the Right Reverend Jerry came not to destroy, but to fulfill. To fill full.

He poked his snakestick into the hatch of the pet caddy. Nobody buzzed. Nobody could. Rattling tended to upset the faithful, so he had soaked the rattle of each of his four Little wine-makers until it rotted into silence. Little Matthew was disengaged from the tangle of his brothers. Eastern diamondbacks were rightly feared for their size and high venom delivery; full-contact bites were almost always fatal. Little Matt was five feet long, with large glands that would effortlessly yield a Love Gift that could convert six hundred sixty-six adults to the cause, and wasn't that a significant coincidence of mathematics? Jerry had to push the figures a smidgen, converting milligrams to grains to ounces. How a lethal dosage was administered was a big variable. But the final number summoned by his calculator was 666, repeating to infinity. That was how many sinners could swing low on three ounces of Little Matt's finest kind. To Jerry, that number was a perfect sign... and wasn't that what really counted in the Big Book? Perfection just tickled God green.

Deacon Curly had not come forth to receive communion. Perhaps he had wandered astray?

Back in the days before it had become synonymous with smut, the Right Reverend Jerry had enjoyed comedy. Upon his nameless deacons he had bestowed the names of famous funnymen. As the ramrods wore out or were retired, Jerry's list of names dwindled. Just now, the deacons in charge were Moe, Curly, W.C., and Fatty. Curly was running late. Tardiness was a sin.

Jerry felt secure that his flock would follow him even without the able assistance of his deacons. He represented the Big Guy, but his course work with Graham and Hummel peeled just as righteously. His tent-revival roots ran deep and wide, he had always trodden the upward path, and his congregation now burgeoned beneath his loving ministrations.

When he sermonized, the born-again seemed to forget their earthly hungers. He could not pinpoint why, past his own Rock-solid certainty that the Word held the power to still the restless, and quiet gnawing bellies. There were other kinds of nourishment; these lost ones were spiritually starved as well. Jerry held dear a reverence for awareness and sheer faith, and fancied he saw both in the eyes of his congregation when he vociferated. He witnessed this miracle in a most hallowed and traditional fashion, during a sermon, when he looked out upon the milling throng and just knew. The born-again depended on him for the Word just as much as the deacons counted on him to deliver the holy inhibitions. Venom governed the deacons, but it had to be a new kind of faith that oversaw the members of the marching ministry. Had to be.

They needed saving. Jerry needed to save. Symbiosis, plain, ungarnished, and God-sanctioned as all get-out.

In a most everlasting way, they fed each other. Maybe it was not such a big whodunit, after all.

Still no sign of Deacon Curly in the sanctuary. Jerry motioned Deacon Fatty inside. Fatty's eye had popped out to hang from the stalk again. Jerry tucked it in and brushed the bugs from this deacon's shoulders, then reknotted the armband which had drooped to the zombie's elbow. Each member of the new congregation wore a Red Cross -- it seemed an appropriate symbol for the New Dawn, and Jerry needed a handy way to take quick head counts while on the march.

The sudden, flat boom of an explosion not far away made Jerry's heart slam on brakes. Deacon Fatty stood unimpressed, awaiting his communion, insects swimming in his free-flowing drool.

Orthodoxies had spent too long fucking up the world, so Wormboy had obliterated all of them with a snap of his knockwurst fingers. Enough was enough. Idiots fumbled about, living their lives by accident, begging nonexistent gods for unavailable mercies, trusting in supernatural beings and nebulous powers of good and evil that predetermined what breakfast cereal they ate. If there was any evil now, its name was either Starvation or Stupidity -- two big items that could make you instant history. Believers spent their lives preparing to die. Wormboy preferred fighting to live.

His survival ethics might become the first writ of a new doctrine. Another system would rise in time. Nobody ever really learned a goddamned thing.

He preferred heavy-caliber projectile peace of mind. Cordite calm. He had named his M60 Zombo and it was swell. One round made raspberry slush. Vaporize the head and the leftovers could not eat you or infect you with the geek germ.

And spraying on Pam kept them from sticking to the cookery.

Wormboy dumped his dishes in the steel tub sink and relaxed on his Valley View sofa. A basso toilet belch eased him into sleep, and he dreamed about the first person he had ever eaten.

Duke Mallett had dubbed him Wormboy because of his obesity and spotty complexion. Which, quoth Duke, indicated that 15th Street Junior High's resident

wimp, blimp, pussywhip, and pariah sucked up three squares chock full 'o night crawlers each day, with squiggly snacks between. "Yo, Wormy -- wotcha got in your locker? More WORMS, huh?" That was always good for a chorus of guffaws from Duke and 15th Streets other future convicts.

Duke smoked Camels. His squeeze, Stacy, had awesome boobs and a lot of pimples around her mouth. She used bubble-gum-flavored lipstick. Two weeks prior to becoming a high school freshman, Dukey wrapped a boosted Gran Torino around a utility pole at ninety. He, Stacy, and a pair of their joyriding accomplices were barbecued by sputtering wires and burning Hi-Test. Paramedics piled what parts they could salvage onto a single stretcher, holding their noses.

Tompkins Mortuary also provided local ambulance service, and when Wormboy caught wind he raced there, to grieve. Old Man Tompkins admired the fat kid's backbone in requesting to view the remains of his classmates. "I have to be sure!" Wormy blurted melodramatically, having rehearsed. Tompkins was of the mind that youngsters could never be exposed to death too soon, and so consented to give Wormboy a peek at the carbonized component mess filling Drawer Eight.

Wormboy thought Tompkins smelted like the biology lab at shark-dissecting time. While the old man averted his gaze with a sharp draw of untainted air, Wormboy sucked wind, fascinated. The flash-fried garbage staining the tray and blocking the drains was Duke. Harmless now. The sheer joy of this moment could not hold, so Wormboy quickly swiped a small sample. When Tompkins turned to look, he sheepishly claimed to have seen enough. He lied.

Later, alone, he wallowed.

The piece he had purloined turned out to be one of Duke's fricasseed eyeballs. It had heat-shrunked, wrinkled in a raisin pattern, deflated on one side, and petrified on the other... but without-a doubt it was one of Dukey's baby blues. The eye that had directed so much hatred at Wormboy was now in his very hand, subtracted of blaze and swagger and no more threatening than a squashed seed grape.

It gave under the pressure of his fingers, like stale cheese. He sniffed. It was sour, rather akin to the smell of an eggshell in the trash, with no insides.

Wormboy popped it between his lips and bit down before his brain could say no. He got a crisp bacon crunch. His mental R.P.M.s redlined as flavor billowed across his tongue and filled his meaty squirrel cheeks.

His mom would not have approved. This was... well, this was the sort of thing that was... just not done.

It was... a rush of liberation. It was the ultimate expression of revenge, of power wielded over Duke the dick-nosed shit-heel. It was the nearest thing to sex Wormboy would ever experience. It was damned close to religious.

Once Wormboy was old enough, he began to work part-time for Old Man Tompkins after school. By then his future was cast, and his extra weight gain attracted no new notice.

At the National Guard armory he had tucked in quite a few Type-A boxed combat meals. The gel-packed mystery meat he pried from olive-drab tins was more disgusting than anything he had ever sliced off down at the morgue.

BONE appetit!

Wormboy's wet dream was just sneaking up on the goo-shy part when another explosion jerked him back to reality and put his trusty .44 in his grasp quicker than a samurai's katana. It was getting to be a busy Monday.

His mountainous gut fluttered. Brritt. Lunch was still in there fighting. But what the binoculars revealed nudged his need for a bromo right out of his mind.

Two dozen geeks, maybe more, were lurching toward the front gates of Valley View. Wormboy's jaw unhinged. That did not stop his mouth from watering at the sight.

The Right Reverend Jerry unshielded his eyes and stared at the sinner on the hilltop as smoking wads of Deacon Fatty rained down on the faithful. He'd been in front. Something fist-sized and mulchy smacked Jerry's shoulder and blessed it with a smear of yellow. He shook detritus from his shoe and thought of Ezekiel 18:4. Boy, he was getting mad.

The soul that sinneth -- it shall die!

Deacon Moe and Deacon Fatty had bitten the big one and bounced up to meet Jesus. The closer the congregation staggered to the churchyard, the better they could smell the sinner... and his fatted calves. The hour of deliverance -- and dinner -- so long promised by Jerry seemed at hand.

Jerry felt something skin past his ear at two hundred per. Behind him,

another of the born-again came unglued, skull and eyes and brains all cartwheeling off on different trajectories. Jerry stepped blind and his heel skidded through something moist and slick; his feet took to the air and his rump introduced itself to the pavement and much, much more of Deacon Fatty. More colors soaked into his coat of many.

The Right Reverend Jerry involuntarily took his Lord's name in vain.

At the next flat crack of gunshot one more of the faithful burst into a pirouette of flying parts. Chunks and stringers splattered the others, who had the Christian grace not to take offense.

Jerry scrambled in the puddle of muck, his trousers slimed and adherent, his undies coldly bunched. Just as wetly, another born-again ate a bullet and changed tense from present to past. Jerry caught most in the bazoo.

It was high time for him to bull in and start doing God's work.

Wormboy cut loose a throat-rawing war whoop -- no melodrama, just joy at what was heading his way. The guy bringing up the rear did not twitch and lumber the way geeks usually did, so Wormy checked him out through the scope of the high-power Remington. He saw a dude in a stained suit smearing macerated suet out of his eyes and hopping around in place with Donald Duck fury.

He wore a Red Cross armband, as did the others. End of story. Next case.

Wormy zeroed in a fresh geek in his crosshairs, squeezed off, and watched the head screw inside out in a pizza-colored blast of flavor. With a balletic economy of motion for someone his size, he ejected the last of the spent brass and left the Remington open-bolted while he unracked his M60. Zombo was hot for mayhem. Zombo was itching to pop off and hose the stragglers. Wormy draped a stretch belt of high-velocity armor piercers over one sloping hillock of shoulder. The sleek row of shell casings obscured the Dirty Rotten Imbeciles logo on his T-shirt.

Dusting was done. Now it was casserole time. Zombo lived. Zombo ruled.

The next skirmish line of Bouncing Bettys erupted. They were halfway to the moat. The stuff pattering down from the sky sure looked like manna.

Jerry let 'em have it in his stump-thumper's bray, full bore: "Onward, onward! Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth!" Isaiah 45:22 was always a corker for rousing the rabble.

By now each and every born-again had scented the plump demon on the hilltop. He was bulk and girth and mass and calories and salvation. Valley View's iron portals were smashed down and within seconds, a holy wave of living-dead arms, legs and innards were airborne and graying out the sunlight.

"Onward!" Jerry frothed his passion to scalding and dealt his nearest disciple a fatherly shove in the direction of the enemy. The sinner. The monster. "Onward!"

The flat of Jerry's palm met all the resistance of stale oatmeal. A fresh cow patty had more tensile strength and left less mess. He ripped his hand free with a yelp and gooey webs followed it backward.

The born-again gawped hollowly at the tunnel where its left tit used to be, and then stumped off, sniffing fresh Wormboy meat.

The explosions became deafening, slamming one into the next, thunderclaps that mocked God. In the interstices, Jerry heard a low, vicious chuddering -- not a heavenly sound, but an evil noise unto the Lord that was making the faithful go to pieces faster than frogs with cherry bombs inside.

He tried to snap off the maggot-ridden brown jelly caking his hand and accidentally boffed Deacon Moe in the face. The zombie's nose tore halfway off and dangled. Moe felt no pain. He had obediently brought the pet caddy, whose occupants writhed and waxed wroth.

Zombo hammered out another gunpowder benediction, and Jerry flung himself down to kiss God's good earth. H6t tracers ate pavement and jump-stitched through Deacon Moe in a jagged line. The pet carryall took two big hits and fell apart. Moe did likewise. His ventilated carcass did a juice dump, and the Right Reverend Jerry found himself awash in gallons of zombie puree plus four extremely aggravated rattlesnakes.

He never found out who was the first to betray him. The first bite pegged him right on the balls, and he howled.

Deacon Moe, his work on this world finished, keeled over with a splat. It was like watching a hot cherry pie hit a concrete sidewalk.

Wormboy rubbed his eyes. Zombo had missed. It wasn't just the salt sting of sweat that had spoiled his aim. His vision was bollixed. The oily drops standing out on his pate were ice cold.

It was probably someone's something he ate.

Zombo grew too heavy, too frying-pan hot to hold. Zombo's beak kept dipping, pissing away good ammo to spang off the metal spikes crowding the moat.

Wormboy gritted his teeth, clamped his clammy trigger finger down hard, and seesawed the muzzle upward with a bowel-clenching grunt. He felt himself herniate below his weight lifter's belt. Zombo spoke. Geeks blocked tracers, caught fire, and sprang apart at the seams. Those behind buffaloeed those in front into the moat. They seated permanently onto the pungi pipes with spongy noises of penetration, to wriggle and gush bloodpus and reach impotently toward Wormboy.

Zombo demanded a virgin belt of slugs.

Wormboy's appetite had churned into a world-class acid bath of indigestion. This night would belong to Maalox.

It took no time for the air to clog with the tang of blackened geek beef. One whiff was all it took to make Wormboy ralph long and strenuously into the moat. Steaming puke pasted a geek who lay skewered through the back, facing the sky, mouth agape. It spasmed and twisted on the barbs, trying to lap up as much fresh hot barf as it could collect.

Zombo tagged out. Wormboy unholstered his .44 and sent a pancaking round into Barf-eater's brainpan. Its limbs stiffened straight as the hydrostatic pressure blew its head apart into watermelon glop. Then it came undone altogether, collapsing into a pool of diarrhetic putresence that bubbled and flowed amidst the pipework.

Now everything looked like vomit. Wormy's ravaged stomach said heave-ho to that, too, and constricted to expel what was no longer vomitable. This time he got blood, shooting up like soda pop to fizz from both nostrils. He spat and gagged, crashing to his knees. His free hand vanished into the fat cushion of his stomach, totally inadequate to the task of clutching it.

The Right Reverend Jerry saw the sinner genuflect. God was still in Jerry's corner, whacking away, world without end, hallelujah, amen.

Jerry's left eye was smeared down his cheek like a lanced condom. Little Paul's fang had put it out. Must have offended him. Jerry seized Little Paul and dashed his snaky brains out against the nearest headstone. Then he began his trek up the hill, through the valley of death, toting the limp, dead snake as a scourge. Consorting with serpents had won him a double share of bites, and he knew the value of immunization. He stung all over and was wobbly on his feet... but so far,

he was still chugging.

This must be hell, he thought dazedly when he saw most of his congregation sliced, diced, and garnishing Valley View's real estate. Tendrils of smoke curled heavenward from the craters gouged rudely in the soil. Dismembered limbs hung, spasming. A few born-again had stampeded over the fallen and made it all the way to the moat.

Jerry could feel his heart thudding; pushing God knew how much snakebite nectar through his veins. He could feel the power working inside him. Blood began to drip freely from his gums, slathering his lips. His left hand snapped shut into a spastic claw and stayed that way. His good eye tried to blink and could not; it was frozen open. The horizon tilted wildly. Down below, his muscles surrendered and shit and piss came express delivery.

As he neared his children, he wanted to raise his voice in the name of the Lord and tell them the famine was ended, to hoot and holler about the feast at last. He lost all sensation in his legs instead. He tumbled into the violence-rent earth of the graveyard and began to drag himself forward with his functioning hand, the one still vised around the remains of Little Paul.

He wanted to shout, but his body had gotten real stupid real fast. What came out, hi glurts of blood-flecked foam, was He ham niss ed begun!

Just the sound of that voice made Wormboy want to blow his ballast all over again.

Jerry clawed onward until he reached the lip of the pit. The born-again congregated around him. His eye globbed on his face, his body jittering as the megadose of poison grabbed hold, he nevertheless raised his snake and prepared to declaim.

Wormboy dragged his magnum into the firing line and blew the evangelist's mush-mouthed head clean off before the mouth could pollute the air with anything further.

"That's better," he ulped, gorge pistoning.

Then he vomited again anyway and blacked out.

Weirder things have happened, his brain insisted right before he came to. None of it had been a dream.

One eye was shut against the dark of dirt and his nose was squashed sideways. Over the topography of regurgitated lunch in front of his face, he watched.

He imagined the Keystone Kops chowing down on a headless corpse. Meat strips were ripped and gulped without the benefit of mastication, each glistening shred sliding down gullets like a snake crawling into a wet, red hole. One geek was busily chomping a russet ditch into a Jerry drumstick with the foot still attached. Others played tug-o-war with slick spaghetti tubes of intestine or wolfed double facefuls of the thinner, linguini strands of tendon and ligaments -- all marinated in that special, extra-chunky maroon secret sauce.

Wormboy's own tummy grumbled jealously. It was way past dinnertime. The remaining geeks would not leave, not with Wormboy uneaten. He'd have to crop 'em right now, unless he wanted to try mopping up in total darkness and maybe waiting until sunup to dine.

He saw one of the geeks in the moat squirm free of a pungi pipe. Its flesh no longer meshed strongly enough for the barbs to hold it. It spent two seconds wobbling on its feet, and then did a header onto three more spikes. Ripe plugs of rotten tissue bounced upward and acid bile burbled forth.

Wormboy rolled toward Zombo, rising like a wrecked semi righting itself. His brain rollercoastered; his vision strained to focus; what the fuck had been wrong with lunch? He was no more graceful than a geek, himself, now. He put out one catcher's-mitt hand to steady his balance against a massive headstone memorializing somebody named Eugene Roach, Loving Father. Mr. Roach had himself lurched off to consume other folks' children a long time ago.

What happened, happened fast.

Wormboy had to pitch his full weight against the tombstone just to keep from keeling over. When he leaned, there came a sound like hair being levered out by the roots. His eyes bugged and before he could arrest his own momentum, the headstone hinged back, disengaging from Valley View's overnourished turf. Arms windmilling, Wormy fell on top of it. His mind registered a flashbulb image of the tripwire, twanging taut to do its job.

The mine went off with an eardrum-compressing clap of bogus thunder. Two hundred pounds of granite and marble took to the air right behind nearly four hundred pounds of Wormboy, who was catapulted over the moat and right into the middle of the feeding frenzy on the far side.

It was the first time in his life he had ever done a complete somersault.

With movie slo-mo surreality, he watched his hunky magnum pal drop away from him like a bomb from a zeppelin. It landed with the trigger guard snugged around one of the moat's deadly metal speartips. The firmly impaled Deacon W.C. was leering down the bore when it went bang. Everything above the Adam's apple rained down to the west as goulash and flip chips.

Wormboy heard the shot but did not witness it. Right now his overriding concern was impact.

A geek turned and saw him, raising its arms as if in supplication, or a pathetic attempt to catch the UFO that isolated it in the center of a house-sized, ever-growing shadow.

Eugene Roach's overpriced monument stone veered into the moat. The mushy zombie watched it right up until the second it hit. The fallout was so thick you could eat it with a fondue fork.

Wormboy clamped shut his eyes bellied in headfirst. Bones snapped when he landed. Only the yellows of the geek's eyes were visible at the end. It liquefied with a poosh and became a wet stain at the bottom of the furrow dug by Wormboy's touchdown. All heads turned.

His brain was like a boardroom choked with yelling stockbrokers. The first report informed him that aerial acrobatics did not agree with his physique. The second enumerated fractures, shutdown, concussion, an eardrum that had popped with the explosive decompression of a pimento being vacuumed from an olive, the equitable distribution of slag-hot agony to every outback and tributary of his vast body... and the dead taste of moist dirt.

The third was a surprise news flash: He had not been gourmandized down to nerve peels and half a dozen red corpuscles. Yet.

He filed a formal request to roll back his eyelids and it took about an hour to go through channels.

He saw stars, but they were in the post-midnight sky above him. He lay on his back, legs straight, arms out in a plane shape. What a funny.

Eight pairs of reanimated dead eyes appraised him.

They've got me, dead bang, he thought. For more than a year they've whiffed me and gotten smithereened... and now I've jolly well been served up to them airfreight, gunless, laid out flat on my flab. Maybe they waited just so I could savor the sensual cornucopia of being devoured alive firsthand. Dr. Moreau time, kids. Time for Uncle Wormy to check out for keeps.

He tried to wiggle numb fingers at them. "Yo, dudes." It was all he could think of to do.

The zombies surrounding him -- three up, three down, one at his feet, and one at his head -- rustled as though stirred by a soft breeze. They communed.

The skull of the Right Reverend Jerry had been perched on his chest. He could barely see it up there. The blood-dyed and tooth-scored fragments had been leaned together into a fragile sort of card ossuary. He could see that his bullet had gone in through Jerry's left eyebrow. Good shot.

His insides convulsed and he issued a weak cough. The skull clattered apart like an inadequately glued clay pot.

More commotion, among the zombies.

The Right Reverend Jerry had been gnawed down to a jackstraw clutter of bones; the bones had been cracked, their marrow greedily drained. All through the feast, there he had been, mere feet distant, representing bigger portions for everybody. He had gone unmolested for hours. Instead of tucking in, they had gathered round and waited for him to wake up. They had flipped him over, touched him without biting. They had pieced together Jerry's headbone and seen it blown apart by a cough. They had witnessed, all right.

He considered the soda-cracker fragments of skull and felt the same rush of revelation he had experienced with Duke Mallett's eyeball. So fitting, now, to savor that crunch stone-ground goodness.

The eyes that sought him did not judge. They did not see a grotesquely obese man who snarfed up worms and eyeballs and never bathed. The watchers did not snicker in a Duke Mallett drawl, or reject him, or find him lacking in any social particular. They had waited for him to revive. Patiently, on purpose, they had waited. For him.

They had never sought to eat of his lard or drink of his cholesterol. The Right Reverend Jerry had taught them that there were hungers other than physical.

One of his legs busted, but with effort he found himself capable of hiking up

onto both elbows. The zombies shuffled dutifully back to make room for him to rise, and when he did not, they helped him, wrestling him erect like dogfaces hoisting the Stars and Stripes on Iwo Jima. He realized that if he cared to order them to march into one of Valley View's crematory ovens according to height, they'd gladly comply.

He had, at last, gained the devoted approval of a peer group.

And any second now, some asshole would try to whore up his resurrection for posterity in a big, bad, black book... and get it all wrong. He decided that anybody who tried would have a quick but meaningful confab with Zombo.

I win again. He had thought this many times before; in reference to those he once dubbed geeks. Warmth flooded him. He was not a geek... therefore they were not.

What he finally spoke unto them was something like: "Aww... shit, you guys, I guess we oughta go hustle up some potluck, huh?"

He began by passing out the puzzle pieces of the Right Reverend Jerry's skull. As one, they all took and ate without breathing.

And they saw that it was good.